

1919 Extraordinary Census of Population in Slovakia A Contribution to the Population History of Slovakia

Summary

The 1919 census of population in Slovakia conducted shortly after the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic was one of the largest undertakings of the newly formed Slovak administration. During the period when the exact borders of Slovakia were being determined at the Paris Peace Conference, it was decided to map the ethnic composition of the population of Slovakia. These data were designed to be used by the representatives of Czechoslovakia to support the claim on the territory of Slovakia and to correct earlier Hungarian statistics which reflected the intensifying magyarization. Aside from these goals, the 1919 census also served a practical purpose: the data obtained were to be used in the administration of Slovakia which was evident in the preparatory phases of the project. This was also the first test of the Slovak administration and it showed all its weaknesses.

In spite of the volatile internal situation, the office of the Minister Plenipotentiary for the Administration of Slovakia set March 1919 as the date for conducting the census. The coup d'état in neighboring Hungary, however, led to the declaration of Martial Law in Slovakia. This, as well as insufficient preparation of the census, caused the project to be postponed. The international situation escalated and a brief armed conflict ensued during which the short-lived Slovak Soviet Republic was formed in Eastern Slovakia, largely on the bayonets of the Hungarian Red Army. In the first days of July 1919, the Hungarian armed forces retreated and the situation in Slovakia was quickly returning to normal. This was the most opportune moment for conducting the extraordinary census. The second official date was set to midnight of August 20th, 1919 and this was when the census finally took place. Aside from certain problems of organizational nature which put the results of the census in question, the census also suffered from logistical shortcomings, insufficient preparation and, last but not least, an utterly inadequate public information campaign. A thorough preparation was thus sacrificed on the altar of the ultimate goal, i.e. obtaining results as fast as possible. And finally, as confirmed by many direct participants, the culminating harvest season had a significant negative impact on the participation of the general population in the census. The extraordinary population census of 1919 was the first of its kind which aimed to ascertain the ethnic make-up of Slovakia. While all previous Hungarian census questionnaires since 1880 included questions concerning one's native language which served as the main factor in determining ethnicity, the 1919 extraordinary census opted for a direct approach and gave the respondents the opportunity to freely declare their ethnicity. Aside from ethnicity, only a few other demographic variables were researched, such as sex, age (year of birth), marital status, household position, languages spoken, literacy and, rather uniquely, the respondent's status in regard to the Great War and the effects of the war on the household. A separate focus was placed on the confessional composition of the population, where the respondents could report their affiliation to one of the following churches and denominations: Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Uniat), Lutheran, Reformed and Israelite. Other denominations were grouped under the heading "other" ("iné vyznanie").

Nevertheless, ethnicity was the most significant piece of data collected. The following "special" ethnicities were defined in the questionnaires: Czechoslovak, Ruthenian, Magyar and German. Other ethnicities were grouped under the heading "other" which wasn't elaborated upon in the final report. The questionnaires for the 1919 extraordinary census did not include "Jewish" as a separate ethnicity. As the results of the regular census of the population

of Czechoslovakia conducted in 1921 showed, Jews formed a large group of the population of Slovakia. It is therefore extremely difficult to try to determine the number of Jews in 1919 Slovakia based on the results of the extraordinary census.

In addition to certain general inaccuracies and the obvious incompleteness of the census which is especially evident from the fact that several townships were not included in the final tally (instead, the result of the previous Hungarian census of 1910 were used), a number of households were left out or not included. Consequently, the results of the census suffered. In spite of this, the basic results are comparable with the following regular census of 1921 which was conducted on the entire territory of the Czechoslovak Republic.

Ironically, the results of the extraordinary census did not serve their main purpose and were not used at the peace conference in Paris during the negotiations. The final results of the 1919 census were published in autumn 1921 by which time the peace conference had already ended. In addition, the regular census of the population of Czechoslovakia had already been completed in autumn 1921.

The results of the census were published in a final report entitled "Soznam miest na Slovensku dl'a popisu ľudu z roku 1919", but the report only included the most basic data like ethnicity, confession, the number of households, the number of people and population make-up based on sex. Other data included on the questionnaires was never published. The basic data were then combined with other data on the administrative division of townships and cities and gave rise to the first topographic lexicon of Slovakia after the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic.

From the point of view of population history of Slovakia, the 1919 extraordinary census is a milestone marking the first population census conducted on the territory of Slovakia proper. Even despite certain inaccuracies noted above, the 1919 census is a fascinating resource for further research on the history of Slovakia and her population.