

Editor's Note:

This article follows on from Heather Booth's article on the German census in RSN 27. It was written by Dr Adler for the European Committee for the Defence of Refugees and Immigrants. Although the census has been postponed there is still a danger that the new right-wing German government may use the questionnaire, or parts of it, in another census.

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE GERMAN CENSUS TO BE HELD ON 27 APRIL

The German Government intends to conduct a census of population on 27th April 1983. For this purpose a questionnaire has been constructed, a copy of which is available. This questionnaire, the political and social importance of the census, and its accuracy will be assessed.

1. Technical considerations.

The questionnaire comprises no less than 32 exhaustive questions; up to 503 entries have to be made. This is by far the largest questionnaire that has ever come to our knowledge. It is well known that a questionnaire should not be longer than is necessary for its being filled in within twenty minutes. This questionnaire will take at least one hour and, where there are several members in a household, even much longer. This must impair the accuracy of the answers because peoples' attention will eventually fail.

The cost of the census is assessed to be DM 371 million (about £100 million) which is an excessive sum for a census enumeration and can only be explained by the great mass of data which will have to be accumulated. The time for this will also have to be excessively long.

In addition to the population census employers will have to fill in separate questions relating to their business, their products, the number of employees (in detail), the payroll etc. Such questions are regularly asked in most countries in a special Census of Production or of Distribution. To ask the employers to fill in the questionnaire in their homes, without being able to refer to the books of the companies concerned, will lead to such inaccuracies that at least this part of the census will be valueless.

Some of the questions in the household survey are very difficult to answer correctly; they will therefore be very inaccurate. An example for this is the question as to when the householder moved in the present home; there will be many people who simply cannot remember this, mainly those who have lived in their present homes for many years. Another such question is to give the square metres of every room, including the loft (if any), and the total square metres occupied. Hardly any householder will be able to answer the question correctly without measuring each room separately; often the total will differ from the figures for each room. There are other questions of lesser difficulties.

2. Political and social consequences of the census.

This is the most important part of this assessment and will be dealt in detail.

According to German statistical law the names of the people must not be disclosed to anybody. Hence in most countries, where similar laws prevail, the name and address is detachable from the questionnaire form. This is not the case with the German form where the information on the name and address is an integral part of the form. In order to detach these scissors will be needed; it is very questionable whether this will be done on the several million questionnaire forms. The government has given an assurance that this will be done, but a large number of Germans doubt this and distrust the government's promises. In addition, every questionnaire contains a bar code (as used in many supermarkets) by which every form can be identified.

In addition, the census asks householders for their telephone numbers. Since they are known in any case and contained in telephone directories, the reason for this question can only be to identify the person who filled in the questionnaire.

We referred above to the question of square metres. This has also social consequences. According to German law every family must live in a home that contains a minimum of square metres. If this condition is not fulfilled, the family can be evicted and, if alien, can be deported from the country. This must increase the anxieties of aliens, especially the Gastarbeiter, because they often live in cramped conditions.

Another German law prescribes that everybody who changed his home must register his new address with the local police (similar laws exist in other countries, but not in the United Kingdom). At least in one town, Munich, the enumerators are promised to receive DM 2.50 for each German who has not registered with the police, and DM 5.00 for every foreigner who has not done so. This will inevitably be seen by many thousands of people who have not conformed with the law as proof that they will be prosecuted and, if foreigners, expelled from Germany.

In addition, these payments are immoral and will impair the accuracy of the census. It will be in the interest of the enumerators to find such people. On the other hand, it is possible that they will receive bribes in excess of DM 5.00, if the enumerator does not indicate that the persons concerned live illegally in Germany. These aliens will be afraid that they will be denounced to the police in spite of the assurances given by the German Home Secretary.

Another question asks for the religion. This might seem to be quite an innocuous question and will be so in other countries. In Great Britain the question is never asked. In Germany, every member of a religious community is compelled by law to pay a religious tax to his community. Millions of Germans are only nominally members of a religious community. They will therefore be afraid that their names will be made known to their church, and they will fill in the questionnaire by stating that they do not belong to any religious community.

In addition, it is questionable that the few thousand remaining Jews in Germany will enter Jewish on the form. They have not forgotten how easy it was for the Nazis to find them from the census forms. Many will therefore make wrong entries.

Another set of questions deals with income, a matter which is considered in many countries as private and confidential. On the German questionnaire they will have to state their exact income in detail, including whether they receive social payments, like pensions, unemployment or sickness benefits etc.

This question is seen by many Germans not only as an infringement of the privacy of the citizen, but to have even more sinister purposes. There can be two reasons for these questions. One is to catch those who receive payments without having a right to them. They will be denounced to the appropriate government departments. The other reason is the black economy which flourishes in Germany as in all other countries. The answer to these questions will enable the tax authorities to find those who have not paid the proper amount of tax, if any. It cannot be the task of this census to support those who infringe the law, but to find the culprits by means of a census which is supposed to be confidential is both immoral and illegal.

Also, the name and address of the employer has to be stated. The reason for this can only be to crosscheck whether the correct amount of income has been given.

Apart from the political and social problems which have been discussed (and there are some more though less important ones) the accuracy of the census will become very doubtful because there are incentives for the population to give the wrong information.

3. Accuracy.

In addition to the statement above there are several other reasons why the accuracy of the census will be in doubt. Altogether some 660'000 enumerators will be used. It is inevitable that a large number of them will not do their job properly. In other countries this has been taken into consideration and the number of enumerators not only very much reduced, but they are also properly trained. This is not the case with the German census where the questionnaire forms contain instructions and definitions which are difficult to understand.

In addition, it seems that not sufficient people have volunteered as enumerators. Therefore civil servants and municipal employees are pressed into this service. In at least one town, Trier, the police president has enounced that police officers will have to serve as enumerators. In other towns tax officers will also be used. It can be easily seen what impression it will make on the householder when he is suddenly confronted with a police man or a tax official.

The accuracy of the census is also in great danger which comes from the refusal of part of the population to cooperate. There are now about five hundred boycott groups in Germany which are agitating for a boycott of the census. It is assumed that one to two millions will not fill in the questionnaires; the penalty for this is DM 10'000, but it is doubtful whether this penalty can be enforced on such a vast number of defaulters. (In Great Britain only about 800 persons refused to cooperate).

There is another difficulty in this connection. Since the recruitment of enumerators is very sluggish the government accepts anybody who volunteers. Among these volunteers are an unknown number of persons who agreed to work as enumerators in order to sabotage it. They will either deliver blank forms or will deliberately give false information.

The German people remember the Nazis' censuses and their misuse very clearly. That is why several Länder parliaments have joined with ordinary people asking for the census to be postponed by several years in order to discuss it much more fully and in order to eliminate questions which can incriminate people.

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14 April 1983

