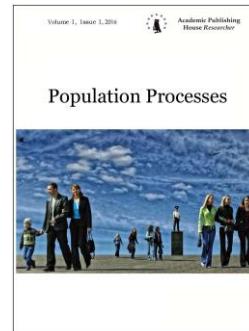


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## **Ethnicity or Language in the Population Census in 1910-1930 Slovakia (Czechoslovakia): Objectivity and Subjectivity of the Ethnic Make-up of a European Country between the Two World Wars**

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### **Abstract**

In Slovakia, the concept of ethnicity was historically tied to two fundamental population attributes – language and community membership. While the statistical practice of the second half of 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century favored language as the primary criterion for determining a person's ethnicity, Czechoslovak statisticians assigned a larger role to a person's self-reported membership in a community. The two characteristics of the ethnic composition of the country – the former objective, the latter subjective – were among the most contentious subjects of debate in the preparatory meetings of every census commission. This paper examines some of the logistical and methodological issues related to the issue of ethnicity and language that the census commissions in three censuses: 1919, 1921 and 1930 were confronted with, seeking to place them in a large historical and geographical context.

**Keywords:** Czechoslovakia, Slovakia, ethnicity, language, censuses, 1919–1930.

### **1. Introduction**

Population censuses constitute a valuable source of knowledge to any historian as they capture a snapshot of the population and its characteristics at a point in time and space. The quantitative data they provide is invaluable in offering more insight into the society and its development, putting a human face on it and offering a platform for estimates, interpretations and contextual valuations of the society's many facets relating to its structure, reproductive behavior and various social processes. In Slovak history, such sources of data are available from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In the oldest censuses, the primary goal was to create a regional or local tax payer registry which was then later supplemented with muster rolls. This was reflected in the nature of the data collected, and thus the earliest surveys only collected the total numbers of tax-paying units (e.g. farmholds) and later names of heads of households on which the tax would be levied, muster rolls expanded its focus on the male population as a whole, recording their age, but also employment status. The 18<sup>th</sup> century sees a qualitative shift in the way population data is collected when the Regnicolaris census ([Acsády, 1896](#)) surveyed the actual number of taxpayers and thus set the stage for the first realistic estimates of the population size in the Kingdom of Hungary and thus Slovakia as well. The end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century then marks the first general population census ordered by Joseph II to assess the military potential of the country ([Thirring, 1938; Acsádi, 1957](#)). The next shift in population surveys takes place in the early years of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

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(1850/1851 and 1857) with the so-called Bach censuses which for the first time in the Kingdom's history seek to gather data that would be useful in the administration of the country ([Az 1850... 1993; Hiredetés... 1856; Mikušová, 2014](#)). The first truly modern census which collected data for the purposes of public administration and scholarly enquiry and which affected the territory of modern-day Slovakia took place in 1869. This census also marks the beginning of the practice of conducting decennial censuses that survived the Austro-Hungarian Empire and continued largely unchanged in its successor states, including Czechoslovakia. And finally, in terms of the types of data collected, the 1880 census marks another important milestone: while the previous censuses did not collect comprehensive data on ethnicity (at most, local surveys would record which language was predominantly used in which settlements), the 1880 census was the first to ask the respondents about their native language. In this paper, we examine how this practice (which continued unchanged until the last census conducted in the Kingdom of Hungary in 1910) affected the way ethnicity was conceptualized in the censuses conducted in Czechoslovakia before World War II.

## 2. Data and Methods

The main primary sources are archival sources of Slovak and Czech state archives and their historical analysis.

## 3. Discussion and Results

### 3.1. Creation of a new statistical service in Czechoslovakia

As a product of the break up of Austria-Hungary, Czechoslovakia incorporated territory from both constituent parts of the Empire with all their differences and idiosyncrasies which included among other things legislation and public administration ([Tišliar, 2013a: 9](#)), but also different population trends which came about as a result of the different population climate in both parts of the Empire ([Tišliar 2013b](#)).

The first steps towards the creation of a statistical service in Czechoslovakia were taken in the immediate aftermath of the new country's formation using the rich tradition of Austro-Hungarian statistics. But even here, there were significant differences between the constituent parts of Czechoslovakia which continued to shape the way statistics and population research were managed in Czechoslovakia as a whole.

In Slovakia, the dissolution of the Empire and the formation of a new nation and its administration created a void where a centralized statistical agency would be. In the western part of Czechoslovakia, however, the former National Statistical Office of the Kingdom of Bohemia (Zemská statistická kancelář království Českého) ([NAČR-1](#)) continued its work by transforming into the new nation-wide State Statistics Bureau of the Czechoslovak Republic (Štátny úrad štatistický Československej republiky) in early 1919 ([Tišliar, 2009: 8-9; NAČR-3](#)). This new agency began to issue directives governing the collection, analysis and publication of statistical data on the territory of the new nation. As such, it not only acted as an arm of the government by organizing censuses, analyzing their data obtained in them and converting them into information vital for the administration of the country, but it should also be viewed through the scientific work and scholarly contribution of its individual members and associates. This included not only population statistics, but also statistics relating to nearly all facets of public life, especially economy, social affairs and public administration. In addition to providing a framework for the day to day activities of the statistical service, one of the major roles of the Czechoslovak State Statistical Administration was to conduct the decennial censuses, process and publish the census data and provide expert input during the creation of statistica legislation and statistical terminology.

As a successor to the National Statistical Office of the Kingdom of Bohemia, the new Czechoslovak statistical administration was founded on the rich tradition of Austrian statistics, but faced with the challenges resulting from the incorporation of the territory of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia, it was compelled to introduce compromise statistical procedures and methods, in order to facilitate temporal and spatial comparability of data obtained in the eastern parts of the country before 1918. This simple fact ultimately came to play a large role in the methodological decisions made during the preparatory phases of each census, especially when it comes to the way ethnicity would be surveyed and analyzed.

Said population census were the largest undertakings in the pre-WWII existence of the Czechoslovak State Statistical Administration. In practical terms, they were intimately tied with the public administration of the country and its large apparatus which was employed in the collection of the data in the field. During the interwar period, two regular nation-wide censuses were conducted in 1921 and 1930 which continued the decennial censuses introduced in by the Austro-Hungarian statistical practice. In Slovakia, two additional census took place in the same period (in 1919 and 1938) without the direct involvement of the State Statistical Administration. Both were conducted by the country's administration, the Czechoslovak Ministry Plenipotentiary for the Administration of Slovakia in 1919 and by the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Region in 1938 ([Tišliar, 2014](#)).

### **3.2. The extraordinary Šrobár census of 1919 in Slovakia and its lessons on ethnic survey**

The incorporation of Slovakia into the newly formed Czechoslovak Republic was far from a one-time straightforward administrative affair and at one point, it involved military action and international assistance. To the Hungarian political elite, the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, especially its Hungarian part, resulting from the loss in The Great War was first and foremost a national tragedy. The outcome of The Great War was to be formalized during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 which was to provide the international guarantees for the new order in Europe. It was that conference that prompted the Slovak political leadership to map the ethnic make-up of Slovakia and use those data to improve the position of Czechoslovakia at the negotiation table in Paris ([SNA-1; NAČR-4](#)). The Czechoslovak government agreed and Vavro Šrobár as the Minister Plenipotentiary for the Administration of Slovakia was tasked with the practical realization of the idea which resulted in the extraordinary census of 1919 that would then bear his name ([Tišliar, 2007](#)).

The first stage of the preparatory work was guided by Josef Mráz, an employee of what was then still the National Statistical Office of the Kingdom of Bohemia who was assigned to the preparatory committee in Žilina as an advisor ([NAČR-2; NAČR-4; NAČR-5](#)). The committee began meeting in January 1919 and, understandably, the issue of ethnicity and how it was to be surveyed played the most prominent role in the discussions ([SNA-2; NAČR-4](#)). Much was said on the subject of what ethnicity is, what the principles of surveying ethnicity should be and how to conceptualize ethnicity as one of the population characteristics. Ultimately, the committee focused on two ways in which ethnicity could be surveyed. The first of them was a person's native language which was a category used in the Hungarian censuses since 1880 and adopting it would enable a historical comparison. In fact, the first draft of the census questionnaire that Vavro Šrobár sent to the ministerial committee in Prague in December 1918 for approval did contain this question ([SNA-1; NAČR-2](#)). However, in subsequent meetings of the preparatory committee in Žilina, a decision was made not to collect data on native language. It had been pointed out that the instructions for census takers in the last Hungarian census of 1910 defined a 'native language' as not only the language a person reports as their native or preferred (spoken at home), but also allowed for scenarios where a child spoke a language different from the one spoken by their mother, such as a language typically acquired at school ([SNA-2; NAČR-2; NAČR-4](#)). This was naturally unacceptable for the purposes of the census. The committee concluded that this way of surveying language use resulted in the artificial statistical increase in the total number for the Magyar ethnic group in the territory of Slovakia, since the Magyar language was not only the official language of the Kingdom of Hungary, but also the primary education vehicle. As such, the language use / ethnicity data collected in the 1910 census and the way they were collected were both deemed utterly useless. The preparatory committee therefore decided to use self-identification as the foundation for the survey of the ethnic make-up of Slovakia.

In general terms, 'ethnicity' was defined as free and direct identification based on the personal conviction of the respondent, much in the same way religious data had been collected in previous Hungarian censuses ([SNA-2](#)).

In strict methodological terms, the 1919 instructions for census takers defined ethnicity as "an ethnic and political conviction of mentally sane individuals aged 15 years or more based on tribal affiliation with a specific nation state or ethnic group" ([ŠAK-1; ŠAB-1; SNA-2; NAČR-2](#)). Since Slovakia was home to a large Jewish community, the question arose as to whether they

should be given the option of self-identifying as members of a Jewish nation. Ultimately, the conclusion was made that no one could be prevented from self-identifying as such, as long as this is the person's true personal conviction ([SNA-2](#)). However, the instructions for census takers did not directly mention the Jewish ethnic group as an option ([ŠAK-1; ŠAB-2; SNA-2](#)). This was because the preparatory committee decided not to include it in the list of official (or 'recommended') ethnic groups, only to allow it as a write-in option when the respondent selected "*other ethnic group*". When filling out the questionnaire, the respondent had the option of identifying as a member of one of the "*special ethnic groups*" or selecting "*other ethnic group*" ([SNA-2](#)). The "*special ethnic groups*" only included the major ethnic groups: Slovak and Czech (a single column under the heading 'Czechoslovak'), German, Hungarian and Ruthenian ([ŠAK-1; ŠAB-1; SNA-2; NAČR-2; NAČR-4](#)). The broad category "*other ethnic group*" was defined as comprising all ethnic groups excluding the four above. When this option was selected, the respondent was required to write the specific ethnic group (either in full or using an abbreviation) in the space provided.

The instructions on how to collect ethnicity data provided to the census takers in 1919 were far from clear. This affected various categories of respondents, such as children, i.e. all persons aged 14 and younger. Their ethnicity was to be determined based on the ethnicity of their parents or, in case of orphans, the ethnicity their parents would "*most likely*" (!) have self-identified as had they been alive ([ŠAK-1; ŠAB-1; SNA-2; NAČR-2](#)). Making matters worse, the instructions failed to consider a quite common scenario where both parents identified with different ethnic groups. The questionnaires show that in the majority of such cases, the children were assigned ethnicity based on their father, but it is also quite common to see them included in the same ethnic group as their mother ([ŠAN-1](#)). And finally, there was the issue of mentally challenged persons where the census takers were advised to *determine* (!) their ethnicity based on the language they spoke ([ŠAK-1; ŠAB-1; SNA-2](#)) while disregarding the opinion of their caretaker. All of this naturally raises a number of questions and issues, especially about the reliability and quality of the collected data.

In spite of all the efforts and planning on the part of the administration, they did not succeed in conducting the census at the originally planned date in March 1919. This delay was caused by the political upheavals related to the proclamation of the Slovak Soviet Republic, but also by errors made during the preparatory and methodological phases ([NAČR-4; SNA-2](#)). Not only did printing the requisite number of census questionnaires turn out to be more difficult than envisioned, but it was also equally difficult to find and train a sufficient number of census takers. The actual census had to be postponed and due to the lack of trained census takers (a number of whom had to be recruited from the Czech parts of Czechoslovakia), in some areas, data collection continued well into December of 1919 ([Mráz, 1921: 23; NAČR-6](#)). This was one of the reasons why the data from the census was never used by the Czechoslovak delegation at the Paris peace talks.

The data on the ethnic make-up of Slovakia was then made public after a long delay in 1921 in the topographic settlements lexicon published by the Ministry Plenipotentiary for the Administration of Slovakia ([Soznam miest..., 1920](#)). However, only the data sets for the four special ethnic groups (Czechoslovak, German, Hungarian and Ruthenian) and for the 'other ethnic groups' category were published. Interestingly, the latter mostly included persons who identified as members of the Jewish nation, as Vavro Šrobár himself pointed out on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1919, at which time the final results had not yet been tabulated ([NAČR-6](#)).

The nascent Czechoslovak statistical service took a great amount of interest in the 1919 census, both its preparation and data collection, as well as its practical aspects like questionnaire design. The Statistics Bureau saw the Šrobár census as both a valuable source of data on the population of Slovakia and as a trial run of sorts for the first regular census planned for the final months of 1920. This was doubly true of the ethnic make-up of the country and so beginning in September 1919, the Statistics Bureau began to demand that the Ministry of the Interior and the Office of the Prime Minister ensure that the Slovak administration send them all materials relating to the census, especially the questionnaires and the records documenting the entire preparatory phase and the process of data collection.

The Office of the Prime Minister forwarded those requests to the Minister Plenipotentiary on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1919, but his office did not respond. For the Minister Plenipotentiary, the goal of the census was not only to collect data (first preliminary and then comprehensive) on the ethnic make-up of Slovakia, but also to compile an official lexicon of settlements for the territory of Slovakia, the absence of which was felt to be one of the major problems facing the new

administration. For this reason, the Minister Plenipotentiary agreed with the proposal to combine the creation of such a registry with the 1919 census data (Tišliar, 2015) even though in early 1919, one of the departments had already started working on a lexicon of settlements, ultimately published in 1920, which would come to be known by the name of his editor-in-chief as the Bezděk settlement survey (Bezděk, 1920). The reason for these duplicate efforts can most likely be found in the simple fact that the 1919 census was a costly affair, both in financial as well as in logistical and material terms, but due to the significant delays in its execution, the data it provided became all but unusable.

In the fall of 1920, the Statistics Bureau once again requested that it be sent the census materials in order to use them and the experience gained during the upcoming nation-wide census, but the more the Slovak administration tarried, the less usable and relevant these materials became (NAČR-7). The Statistics Bureau finally managed to acquire the basic documentation, but the Slovak administration was not able to provide the full set of material, including the questionnaires, until early 1923 (NAČR-8). This was to be used after processing and analysis for the purposes of comparison, but this never came to be. After nearly three decades, all the material was – largely thanks to no interest on the part of the Slovak administration – scrapped and recycled in 1950 (NAČR-9).

### **3.3 The ethnic survey in the 1921 census**

As the first regularly scheduled population census designed to continue the Austro-Hungarian practice of decennial censuses, the nation-wide 1921 census, originally planned for the end of 1920, was much more detailed than the extraordinary census of 1919 (NAČR-10). It sought to survey the entire territory of Czechoslovakia and as such, it was managed by the Statistics Bureau and authorized by appropriate legislation. The government originally planned to establish a five-year cycle of follow-up censuses, but this proved to be unrealistic largely for financial reasons (Šprocha, Tišliar, 2009: 12; C-SDPL-2). The Statistics Bureau would also go on to process and analyze the collected data and publish them in detail in a series of volumes of the edition *Československá statistika* (*Československá statistika*, No. 9, 22, 23 a 37). All these efforts were spearheaded by the eminent statistician and demographer Antonín Boháč (NAČR-11) who was also the first to publish a detailed evaluation of the census and its results (Boháč, 1924).

Originally, the Statistics Bureau considered not including the territory of Slovakia in the census and using the data collected in the 1919 extraordinary census. In the end, however, those who considered the Šrobár census data incomplete and insufficient prevailed and ensured that Slovakia would be covered by the 1921 census. One of the key arguments here that swayed the general opinion was the lack of data on the economic activity of the population which the Šrobár census did not collect in any form.

The ethnic survey in the census of February 15<sup>th</sup> 1921 assumed ethnicity to be a tribal affiliation, with the native language as a common outward sign thereof (NAČR-11), whereby the official methodology strictly forbade the identification of tribal affiliation with territory. The only exception to this definition was the Jewish population of Czechoslovakia which was not defined as tied to either language or membership in a religious community or any other outward manifestation of said affiliation. This definition was the result of a vote taken by the State Statistical Council, a political body charged with outlining the major methodological aspects of the census. It passed by a single vote, 8 to 7, and would become a source of tensions especially in the western-most parts of Czechoslovakia which was inhabited by a large German minority (Boháč, 1930: 3; NAČR-12).

Originally, there were two proposals for the definition of ethnicity. The first one, tabled by the representatives of the Statistics Bureau on the State Statistical Council, sought to use a person's native language as the primary sign of their ethnicity in an effort to implement a more objective criterion for the ethnic survey of the country. The aforementioned Antonín Boháč, as the leader in the field of population studies and the person behind the methodology of the interwar censuses in the Czechoslovakia, was the primary proponent of this proposal, as was Jan Auerhan, the director of the Czechoslovak State Statistics Bureau (NAČR-11). The other proposal favored direct self-identification as the main criterion in determining the person's ethnicity. Despite the actual wording of the definition (which was the result of a compromise), it was the latter proposal that finally prevailed and a person's native language was not used to directly determine their ethnicity.

An alternative proposal to collect data on both ethnicity and native language did not gain much currency ([Boháč, 1930: 4](#)). The position that the Slovak members of the Population Statistics Subcommittee of the State Statistical Council took is particularly interesting: they supported the first proposal, i.e. native language as the primary criterion in determining membership in an ethnic group ([NÁČR-13](#)). The surviving records indicate that preferred native language as an objective criterion over self-identification “*for specifically Slovak national and political reasons*”. One can only assume that this was due to the experience with the 1919 census, the issue of fluidity in ethnic and national self-identification (see below) and the possibility of misuse of the census for political manipulation.

The issue of ethnic survey was an international problem which individual nations approached in different ways, from the total denial of the existence of any minorities to more enlightened attempts to find reliable subjective and objective criteria which were then occasionally swapped during individual population censuses. The first International Statistical Congress in Brussels in 1853 devoted some time to the question and recommend that a person’s main or home language be used as a facultative criterion in the survey of a nation’s ethnic make-up. At the 1872 Congress in Saint Petersburg, the issue was raised again and three members were tasked with the preparation of written opinions on the issue. All three were from Austria-Hungary, a noted multiethnic state where the question of surveying the ethnic composition was a fundamental issue in everyday statistical practice. Ignaz Eduard Glatter of the Statistical Bureau in Vienna viewed ethnicity from the racial (i.e. biological) standpoint and recommended the use of physical and mental attributes for the purposes of surveying ethnicity. Adolph Ficker favored the native or main language as the primary outward sign of membership in an ethnic group arguing that there exist no objective signs thereof. And finally, Károly Keleti, a prominent Hungarian statistician, outlined his view of ethnicity as a form of group consciousness and sense of belonging to a community based on shared history and shared interests. Keleti himself, however, denied the existence of any outward signs of ethnicity and therefore recommended not surveying it at all. The Saint Petersburg Congress thus ultimately only confirmed the recommendations of the Brussels Congress and so for much of the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, language remained the primary data point in all population censuses. In most countries except Austria and Belgium, a person’s native language was considered an objective outward sign of their ethnicity where it was defined quite straightforwardly as the language the child learned from their mother or their family. The only exception, as noted above, was Hungary, where in addition to this common-sense definition, the statistical practice allowed a scenario where a language which child had learned in kindergarten or at school and which was different from that learned from their mother or spoken at home was recorded as the child’s native language. This is was a blatant attempt by the Magyar political leadership to artificially inflate the numbers of speakers of Magyar and thus the population numbers of the Magyar ethnic group ([Holec, 2010](#)).

Austria and Belgium remained the only countries where main language, i.e. the language most often used in the contact with other people or the language of the community a person lived in (*langue parlée* or *obcovací jazyk* in Slovak contemporary parlance), rather than native language was used as the primary data point. A person’s native language was viewed as a personal attribute, whereas main language was considered an attribute of communities or social groups ([NÁČR-13](#)). In Austria, this data was then used as a basis for the analysis of the ethnic composition of the country.

One major argument against surveying ethnicity directly is the vagueness of the concept itself and the answers to the question in the questionnaire and the related fluidity of self-identification where a person might claim to be a member of one ethnic group in one census, but identify as a member of a different group in the next. The first country which collected data on both ethnicity and language was Bulgarian in 1900. However, as Boháč notes, that in Bulgaria, ethnicity was not a national and political concept, but rather an ethnographic one and, interestingly, the results for both categories differed only minimally. In the interwar period, both language and ethnicity were surveyed in Russia, Latvia and Poland with the ethnicity considered a national and political category. Along with Lithuania, Czechoslovakia thus remained one of the two countries which only surveyed ethnicity.

During the preparation of the 1921 census, one of the major issues that arose in connection with the ethnic survey of the country was the absence of a clear definition of the crucial terms such

as “národ” (“nation”, “ethnic group”) and “národnost” (“ethnicity”, but also “ethnic minority”),<sup>1</sup> but a lack of a clear and binding definition of what a language is in terms of applicable legislation. The 1920 Constitution guaranteed all citizens the right to self-identify as a member of an ethnic group regardless of race, language or religion ([C-SDPL-3](#)). However, the Language Act of 1920 which established the conditions for the use of minority languages in Czechoslovakia did not differentiate between languages and ethnic groups when it established an ethnic threshold for the use of a minority language in government business in a particular locality ([C-SDPL-4](#)). In this context, Boháč also notes the Opinion no. 109 of the Supreme Administrative Court of the Czechoslovak Republic dated January 7<sup>th</sup> 1925 which confirms that the Language Act explicitly uses membership in a language community and membership in an ethnic group as synonyms ([NAČR-11](#)).

Immediately after the State Statistical Council voted to use self-identification as the primary criterion for a person’s membership in an ethnic group in the 1921 census, several members of the Population Statistics Subcommittee protested and on October 8<sup>th</sup> 1920 they filed a written petition objecting to the decision not to use a strictly linguistic criterion ([NAČR-13](#)). They argued that the adopted solution would lead to problems when using the census data in connection with the administration’s rights and duties as set forth by the Language Act. Additionally, they used the 1919 census which also used self-identification when surveying ethnicity as an example of possible political manipulation. Pointing out that the Language Act required a detailed linguistic survey of the country, they also considered the concept of a Jewish ethnic group a seriously flawed one. And while their concerns regarding the execution of the government’s duties under the Language Act were ultimately proven to be unfounded, the protesters were certainly correct when it comes to the Jewish ethnic group which, after all, did not conform to the definition of an ethnic group by either of the two sets of criteria.

The apparent paradox disappears when we view the issue of the Jewish minority through the prism of the ethnic policy of the Czechoslovak government. By giving Czechoslovakia’s Jews the option of self-identifying as members of the Jewish nation, the government created a transparent and legal way of reducing the numbers for the two largest ethnic minorities, the Germans and the Magyars, since the previous censuses conducted by Austrian and Hungarian statisticians had consistently shown that the Jewish population of Austria-Hungary spoke either German or Magyar. Whether this made sense is an open question – after all, it is just as likely that in the same censuses, those who were recorded as speaking German and Hungarian (and thus counted as members of those ethnic groups) were actually Jews and would now self-identify as such. This, however, could be determined from the actual census data.

All of this clearly shows one of major problems with the first regular nation-wide census conducted by the Czechoslovak government in 1921: an almost crippling inability to agree on clear rules. Consequently, the definition of ethnicity which was intended to be a compromise between two competing factions actually turned out to favor one of them, the one that preferred native language as a determining outward sign of ethnicity. This is evidenced by the census questionnaire where the ethnicity column bore the title “*ethnicity (native language)*” (“národnosť (materinský jazyk)”). On the other hand, the vote taken by the State Statistical Council said otherwise and, more importantly, the instructions for census takers and in the government decree which governed the 1920 census both of which implemented said vote contained a number of rules which made it clear that self-identification, not language, was to be used as the primary criterion in determining a person’s ethnicity. According to the government decree, when filling out the questionnaires, it was the duty of the head of the household to write down the ethnicity of all persons who were not members of his household *as they themselves professed it to be*. Much in the same way, the head of the household was obligated to write down the ethnicity of all underaged persons and all mentally uncapable persons. All mentally sane adults, however, were supposed to *report their ethnicity themselves*. Should someone give two or more ethnicities, the census taker were to *provide instructions (!)* on how to answer the question and “*if the answer continues to be unsatisfactory even after such instruction, the census taker will determine the person’s ethnicity based on their native language*” ([C-SDPL-5](#)). Such instruction should, naturally, make it clear that a person can only self-identify as a member of one ethnic group. Non-family members of the household (domestic servants, guests etc.) were to be “asked about their ethnicity directly” (“*opýtať na národnosť priamo*”). However, the census taker was authorized by the government decree to change the entry in the ethnicity column if it was “obviously incorrect” (“*zrejmú nesprávnost*”)

whereby the decree did not make it clear or indeed even define what exactly constituted such obvious error. In such cases, the change had to be approved and confirmed by means of a signature by the respondent themselves. Should the respondent decline, the decision was appealed to the county office. The language was thus used as merely a secondary characteristic in situations where there was uncertainty or the respondent gave more than one answer. And finally, the instructions for census takers made it clear that for all persons aged 15 and above, the census taker was to write down the ethnicity the *respondent themselves freely professed as their own* (*Československá statistika*, vol. 9: 13\*; NAČR-11). This makes it obvious that the data collected in the 1921 census truly reflects the ethnic and not the linguistic make-up of the population which supports the same conclusion reached by Boháč in his analysis of said data (Boháč, 1924: 59\*).

### 3.4 The ethnic survey in the 1930 census

Having learned a number of lessons from the controversial definition of ethnicity in the 1921 census and having endured great amount of criticism, especially from German community in the western parts of Czechoslovakia but also from the Statistics Bureau itself, the Population Statistics Subcommittee of the State Statistical Council tasked with the preparation of the 1930 census was forced to once again address the issue on how to survey ethnicity in the upcoming census. The debate began in the fall of 1929 in a special session of the State Statistical Council (Boháč, 1931: 17) when the proposal to use native language was once again defeated after only four members (Auerhan, Boháč, Rauchberg and Schönbaum) voted in favor. The difference in opinion among the members of the subcommittee resulted in the creation of an *editorial circle* which was assigned the task of preparing a draft of the definition of ethnicity (native language). The text of the first draft read as follows: “*Ethnicity shall be recorded for each person present at census (whether they be a citizen of Czechoslovakia or any other country) based on their native language. Only one ethnicity (native language) can be recorded. A native language is defined as the language which the counted person has been speaking since childhood. Jewish ethnicity (native language) shall therefore be recorded if the counted person's native language is Hebrew or the so-called Jargon.*<sup>2</sup> *For children who are not yet able speak and for persons who are unable to speak due to their physical or mental condition, their ethnicity shall be determined based on the ethnicity of their parents or, in case of uncertainty, based on the ethnicity of their mother. Ethnicity (native language) can be recorded based on the free and truthful statement given by the counted person; for children aged 14 and younger and for persons mentally ill, the ethnicity of their parents or legal guardians shall determine theirs. No one, not even the census taker, shall exercise any pressure.*” The obvious purpose of this definition was to use the native language as the exclusive objective outward sign of ethnicity, even for the Jewish population. This draft was discussed in detail at the meeting of the editorial circle on November 29<sup>th</sup> 1929 and the discussion once again ended with a compromise and an ambiguous hybrid definition. Some members of the committee were quick to point out that such a definition would turn an ethnicity survey into a straightforward linguistic survey and would thus be effectively useless for the declared purpose. This is an accurate observation, especially when considering the rather unfortunate wording of the title of the ethnicity column on the census questionnaire – “ethnicity (native language)” (“národnosť (materinský jazyk)”) – which was first implemented in 1921 and left unchanged in 1930 even though the definitions of both terms underwent a shift and there was a clear tendency for identification of one with the other. This decision was defended with arguments concerning continuity in the survey of ethnicity based on the respondents’ native language (Boháč, 1931: 17).

The final compromise reached by the Subcommittee removed the definition of a native language altogether and established a wider definition of Jewish ethnicity. However, it retained the basic principle of determining ethnicity by native language. The updated draft was then submitted to the Population Statistics Committee which finally approved it without any changes in January 1930, even though the preceding debate featured a number of objections. The strongest one came from the Bratislava Chamber of Commerce and Industry (according to Boháč, it was authored by I. Karvaš) and concerned the lack of definition of native language. As the text of the objection pointed out, a clear and unambiguous definition of the concept is especially important for Slovakia, since the definition used in Hungarian census was markedly different and – to put it bluntly – designed to ensure that as many Non-Magyars as possible would be counted as Magyars. The Bratislava Chamber of Commerce and Industry therefore agreed with the original proposal of

the editorial circle and requested that a native language be defined as the language a child learns at home.

The new submissions then forced the Committee to defer the matter to the Subcommittee for renewed reconsideration. A new editorial circle was convened which ultimately recommended to only collect data on native language, but the Subcommitté was once again flooded with proposals that often ran counter to each other. In the end, it was agreed that ethnicity should be recorded for every person present at census based on the language which the counted person has learned best and which they use most often “that is, typically their native language” (“*to jest spravidla jazyk materinský*”) ([NAČR-11](#)).

The proposal prepared by the Ministry of the Interior on May 20 1930 then once again changed the definition of ethnicity and its relationship to native language and brought it closer to that used in the 1921 census: “*We take ethnicity to mean tribal affiliation of which the native language is the primary outward sign. An ethnicity different from that manifested by the counted person's native language can only be recorded if the counted person does not speak their native language either in the family circle or at home, but is in full command of the language of another ethnic group. Jews, however, can always record their ethnicity as Jewish.*” This proposal was accepted by the government with minor editorial changes and the text of the final version of the government decree which governed the 1930 census read: “*Ethnicity shall be typically recorded according to the counted person's native language. An ethnicity different from that manifested by the counted person's native language can only be recorded if the counted person does not speak their native language either in the family circle or at home, but is in full command of the language of another ethnic group. Jews, however, can always record their ethnicity as Jewish*” ([C-SDLP-6](#)). The government decree also retained the principle according to which native language should be used to determine a person's ethnicity in case they are unable or unwilling to indicate it or in case they give two or more. Consequently, the 1930 census again failed to provide any objective criteria for Jewish ethnicity and, to complicate matters even further, it allowed the census takers to record ethnicity different from that indicated by the person's native language if the person in question did not use their native language in everyday communication and was in good enough command of a different language. In J. Auerhan's interpretation, this would allow people who have fully assimilated to identify with the ethnic group whose language they have adopted. Such persons could also report their (original) native language even when – so Auerhan – they were no longer in perfect command of said language ([NAČR-11](#)).

How do we account for the persistent efforts to combine ethnicity and language when these are obviously two different attributes? As we have shown, the Statistics Bureau and its representatives consistently defended the view that only native language should be surveyed. It was the State Statistical Council, a political body, which insisted – although not unanimously – on tying the two attributes together. They did so for several reasons, including the aforementioned continuity of data collection and thus comparability of data. But one of the major reasons was a political one or rather a question of transparency and prestige: some members of the preparatory committee did not wish to change the methodology of surveying ethnicity in order to avoid creating any doubts as to the validity of the 1921 census data and the validity of the 1921 census – as the first official census conducted in the territory of Czechoslovakia – as a whole. Last but not least, there were legal – or perhaps legalistic – reasons for the continuity which arose in connection with the Supreme Administrative Court's opinion which confirmed that the 1920 Language Act considered membership in an ethnic group and membership in a linguistic community one and the same.

The definition of ethnicity in the 1930 census was undoubtedly more solid than the one used previously, as language played a crucial role in determining a person's ethnicity and was no longer just an outward sign of membership in an ethnic group to be used only in case of uncertainty. On the other hand, the census – and thus the general statistical practice – did not go far enough and did not establish native language as the general criterion for ethnicity. As a consequence, the Jewish population could – under certain conditions – identify with another ethnic group regardless of the native language of the person, thus calling into question the objective nature of the ethnic survey. This and other similar exceptions cast doubt on the census data that, in turn, continue to cast doubt on the survey of the ethnic make-up of interwar Czechoslovakia to this very day.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, while the pre-1918 ethnic surveys in Slovakia used native language to survey the ethnic composition of the country, after the formation of Czechoslovakia, free self-identification became the primary or even the only criterion. In 1880, the Hungarian censuses implemented the recommendations made by the International Statistical Congresses in Brussels and Saint Petersburg to establish language as an objective measure of the ethnic composition of a population, but it became apparent at an early stage in the preparation of the census that the definitions and nature of native language were molded to suit the political interests of the majority ethnic group. The Šrobár census of 1919 was a direct reaction to such manipulation and as such, it refused to continue the Hungarian practice of using a compromised definition of native language in surveying ethnicity and opted for a subjective approach by inquiring about the individuals national and ethnic conviction. The census of 1921 adopted a nearly identical approach by emphasizing self-identification and only adding language for the purposes of clarification. And while the 1930 census emphasized the role of language as an objective way of determining a person's membership in an ethnic group, the continued existence of the Jewish ethnicity as a distinct ethnic group without any objective characteristics and the possibility (albeit limited and confined to a few well-defined scenarios) of ignoring native language and self-identifying with a different ethnic group undermined its methodological underpinnings and, ultimately, the validity of the collected data as well.

And finally, we should briefly note the terminological and practical issues we described above for the Jewish minority were far from unique. In Slovakia, the Ruthenian minority was also affected by the variation in labels and definitions ([Šprocha, Tišliar, 2012: 179](#)). And so while the 1919 census used the term "Ruthenian", but also allowed the respondents to identify as Russian by selecting the "other" category, the 1921 census established a new special ethnic group under the label "Russian" which included Ruthenians (i.e. Carpatho-Ruthenians), Russians and Ukrainians. The Ruthenian ethnic group was officially designated as "the Subcarpathian branch of the Russian nation" ("Podkarpatskú vetvu Ruského národa"). In 1930, the definition underwent another modification and the census recognized two Russian ethnic groups, Great Russians and Little Russians, the latter of which included the indigenous Ruthenian population of Czechoslovakia ([Korčák, 1934: 46\\*](#)).

#### 5. Note

<sup>1</sup> To illustrate the terminological and political issues at play, we could cite the commentary to the 1920 Constitution which explicitly states that "*The heading of the Article Six of this Constitution purposefully uses the term 'national minorities' instead of 'ethnic minorities'. Our brethren in Slovakia and in Subcarpathian Ruthenian, like many of other nations of former Hungary, suffered the ignobility of being refused to be considered full nations and being relegated to the status of mere ethnic groups. The constitutional committee strove hard to avoid this injustice*" (see [C-SDPL-1](#)).

<sup>2</sup> "Žargón" in the original, meaning Yiddish or possibly other varieties of German used by the Jewish population of Slovakia.

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**C-SDPL-3** – Act No. 121/1920 Sb. z. a n.

**C-SDPL-4** – Act No. 122/1920 Sb. z. a n., §2.

**C-SDPL-5** – Act No. 592/1920 Sb. z. a n., §20

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**NAČR-7** – NAČR, f. PMR, škat. 3285, sign. č. 11761/III. – 20.

**NAČR-8** – NAČR, f. PMR, škat. 3285, sign. č. 694/ pres. – 23.

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