
Society, Politics and Demography

The Example of Soviet History*

ALAIN BLUM**

Institut National d'Études Démographiques, Paris

Abstract: Of particular interest within the history of the USSR is how a very strong political desire to disrupt society, its foundations, its structure and its functioning wholly achieved these goals. The notably uneven history of the USSR leads the author to examine the marks it left on social behavioural patterns. This article – with the analysis both of demographic behaviour and the relation between political decisions regarding this and the subsequent social response as point of departure – attempts to provide preliminary answers to these questions. It reveals a real autonomy of behaviour in the face of often fluctuating decisions and therefore offers a reflection on the nature of political constraints. The article makes explicit, through several examples, the particular place statistical administration occupies at the junction between politics and society. Thus it becomes possible to propose a number of hypotheses on an increasing estrangement between the political world and individuals.

Czech Sociological Review, 1996, Vol. 4 (No. 1: 81-95)

The demographic history of the USSR and its demographic statistics are particular points of interest in the research on the relationship between political and social practices. They also allow – through the study of the production mechanisms of these statistics – the elaboration of a deeper reflection on the relationship between politicians and administrators.

The respective positions of the State and society, the mediation of the administration, the autonomy of the political dynamics and their impact on social conventions are at the centre of these enquiries. Tackling Soviet history via its demographic dynamics allows in effect for the advancement of numerous hypotheses which provide us with an opportunity to illuminate this interaction between the political and social spheres. Soviet history characterises itself, in particular, by the will of the State – rarely pushed to such limits – to effect a modification, indeed a bouleversement of individual behaviour. This touched numerous domains of private life: the desire for a new family, for new relationships between couples, for a new sexuality. These imperatives were most often expressed and made concrete by the State through declarations, laws or decrees, by political manipulation, by articles in the press. Thus, during the 20s and 30s, the individual was subjected to a political policy of change and struck by a series of catastrophic events of direct impact upon demographic dynamics.

The consequences of both this “totalitarian intention” and a particularly uneven history on individual behaviour – as perceived or measured by temporal or geographic

*) This text follows on from a seminar that took place in Prague in June 1994 on the initiative of CEFRES. I hereby thank the centre, the discussions during the seminar having been extremely useful. This piece of work has also benefited from remarks made during the seminar on Eastern Europe at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris in November 1994.

***) Direct all correspondence to Alain Blum, director of research at the Institut National d'Études Démographiques (INED), 27 rue du Commandeur, 75675 Paris Cedex 14, e-mail blum@ined.fr

demographic dynamics – have been the focus of previous research.¹ We will present its conclusions through several revealing examples of this attempt at social upheaval which did not result in a profound modification of societies. These societies have, on the contrary, closed themselves off from the political world to follow autonomous paths certainly, that is, when perceived through demographic behaviour, a subtle gauge of social behaviour. This closing off and this failure can be observed on the geographical level, when we affirm the permanence of spatial disparities and the continuity of a space of colonial nature from the time of the Tsarist empire to the end of the Soviet Union. They are also to be observed when one traces demographic dynamics through time, subjected, as they are, to the perils and about-turns of legislation, violently disturbed by great demographic catastrophes in the short term, but far more autonomous if one moves beyond the short term to interpret these evolutions over longer periods.

The study of demographic behaviour leads, moreover, to an understanding of the mechanisms of the production of statistical data. This, however, is not interesting merely from the point of view of better establishing the quality of sources used. In fact, it also provides numerous elements for the analysis of the relations between the three levels constituted by the political world, administration and society. One thereby joins debates which have constantly accompanied the examination of the soviet world, debates in which the proponents of the interpretation of this history as a monolithic, top-down system and those researching an operational logic implying more profound social dynamics are opposed.² As proof, one can cite Hannah Arendt, a pioneer in the definition of “totalitarian” in soviet history, who made occultation, indeed the absence of reliable statistics, one of the foundations of her model:

“Despite ‘an abundance of almost unclassifiable material on the purges’ of 1929 to 1937, it contains no indication of the number of victims nor any other statistical data of vital importance. Each time the statistics are presented, they are hopelessly contradictory [...] in other words, if we had always known that official soviet publications had propaganda goals and were never in the least bit reliable, it now seems that dependable sources and statistical materials probably never existed anywhere.” [Arendt 1972: 10]

“This is even true of some of their strange lacunas, especially those concerning statistical data. This absence simply proves that in this regard, as in all others, the Stalinist regime was unapologetically coherent: all the facts that did not tally or could not be tallied with the official fiction – data on harvests, crime, real incidences of ‘counter-revolutionary’ activities, as opposed to previous fictive conspiracies – were considered unreal. In complete harmony with the totalitarian contempt for facts and reality, all data of this type, instead of being assembled in Moscow from the four corners of the immense territory, were first brought to the attention of the respective districts by their publication in *Pravda*, *Izvestia* or some other official organ in Moscow, such that each region, each district of the Soviet Union received its statistics – official and fictive – exactly as they received the no less fictive norms allocated them by the five year plans.” [Ibid.: 18]

¹) The present article is based on several themes developed in the work [Blum 1994a].

²) For a clear and synthesizing overview of the principles of the “totalitarian school” and those of the “revisionist school”, see [Werth 1993], as well as the preface by [Werth and Moullec 1994].

In this text, which summarises to perfection the initial leanings of what was known as the “totalitarian school”, two images clash which long formed the two central axes of the historiography dealing with the USSR. On the one hand, the manipulative desire of those in power who present the country the way they want it to be seen; on the other, as a consequence of this, a non-existent or manipulated statistical structure. One can therefore understand the current importance of deepening the work on soviet statistical administration, and in particular that of the 30s as well as on the administrative institution itself, its representations and what it provided the political world, and the personnel that worked there. The opening of the archives actually allows access to reports from the 30s, to administrative correspondence, to statistical materials, such as they were collected, prior to their communication, access to the procedures which transformed them.

Such a deepening of research in fact shows unambiguously that statistical sources existed, that the production of figures was important and elaborated by an administrative apparatus that often did not deform it. The above description of a soviet world without statistics or falsified statistics is thus incorrect. We will present a number of research hypotheses which help explain the relation between statistical administration (demographic, so that the field is well-defined, and can be followed continuously from the beginning of the 20th century through to the Second World War right through to today even) and the political world, as well as between statistical administration and observation of the social world.

Social Continuities

Here we will merely indicate, with three examples developed in other works, the application of study on demographic behaviour to examine the relation between the political world and social dynamics. The first will deal directly with the 20s and 30s, and the geography of demographic catastrophes; the second will touch very briefly on the question as to the nature of soviet space as a colonial expansion or a unique and specific model. Finally we will examine from the longer-term perspective the larger characteristics of certain demographic dynamics as they are linked to certain constraints which could have or did overthrow them.

The Geography of Demographic Catastrophes

The famine of 1933 has been interpreted by numerous historians as an explicit intention to strike at the Ukraine, to expunge any desire for independence. Behind this interpretation lies the conviction on the part of certain historians and sociologists that the omnipotence of the political decisions made by the centre, and by Stalin himself, as deeply modifying demographic and social dynamics. Is this famine, the result of a particularly dark period, a fundamental stage in the history of Stalinism, thus apart from Russian history? Is it a turning point in a soviet history definitively stranger to its past? If one puts the geography of the 1933 crisis in perspective as we have reconstructed it from the results of various censuses as well as the geographies of the crises of the 19th century or of 1921-22, one realises that the interpretation cannot be made at this level alone [Adamets, Blum and Zakharov 1993].³ The crisis of 1933 not only affected the Ukraine,

³) English version revised and specially prepared for the conference on Soviet Population in the 1920s and 1930s. Center for Russian and East European Studies, Toronto, Canada, 27-29 January 1995.

but also the whole of Southern Russia as well as Kazakhstan. This geography provides numerous analogies with previous crises. The evidence suggests that the origin of the crisis was the policy of total collectivisation; Stalin's refusal to acknowledge the famine, in spite of all the information received⁴ explains the magnitude of it – one never before achieved in Europe. It is no less true that it also reflects a traditional conflict between a centre seeking to control a territory in its entirety and a periphery seeking to remain autonomous. This crisis is the expression of a great instability and, especially, of the failure of the soviet territory to achieve a coherence with Russian history: it presents a traditional schema of the 19th century, in a world subjected to a massive industrialisation. The form of control took on an extreme dimension, with political determination becoming primordial; they did not, however, modify those outlines inscribed in the logic of old spatial and social relations of the Russian ancien regime.

The geographical space – soviet or colonial?

Another example testifying to a certain autonomy of social forms: the development of the regions belatedly integrated to Russia, the regions of central Asia or the Caucasus. Many saw the soviet space as foreign to a logic of colonial composition. In this case there would be a rupture in the imperial Russian space. The important question is therefore to know if we can speak of colonialism within the soviet framework. Is there a continuity between Russian colonialism and soviet colonialism? Those defending a specific nature of the soviet space placed the accent on a far greater homogeneity of this space, from central Asia to Caucasia than in the other colonial empires. They proposed, for example, the same analysis of social stratification in Russia and central Asia. They spoke of soviet society because the language of the statistician or the statesman had been made uniform for the entire Soviet Union, and was irremediably removed from the language used elsewhere in Europe. The Uzbek or Ukrainian peasant no longer existed – he was replaced by the kolkhoziyan, with nothing to affirm that the first was closer to the second than to Iranian peasant. Was this a case of a real transformation of societies, or was it simply a linguistic illusion, an erroneous metaphor? Several studies have shown and show today that traditional structures have persisted [see for example, among more recent articles, Roy 1993], that the kolkhoze has often reclaimed – under the soviet guise – traditional power relations in the regions.

The study of demographic behaviour, the manner in which the soviet space was populated, as well as the modifications in the demographic dynamics in the colonised space – particularly in central Asia – also shows that the impact of the soviet presence on the colonial margins was not so very different from those of the Russian empire or the USSR or, in the post-war period between the French empire and the soviet empire indeed, later, between the processes inducted by the relations between the developed and developing countries.

Hence, the observation of demographic dynamics confronted by political and legal constraints shows that the latter had no great effect and that one could interpret the demographic transition in the states of central Asia within a theoretical framework corresponding to that of other developing countries: the Soviet Union even enacted a policy similar

⁴ It is strictly impossible today to claim that the politicians were not in the know. The very size of the catastrophe proves this, although the reports on the demographic situation kept at the RGAE show that they also received detailed information.

to the one applied in the 60s and 70s by developed countries in their relations to developing countries. A few examples bear clear witness to this.⁵ The laicisation of marriage, not followed by a secularisation, forced the marriage age to be raised and religious marriage and traditional practices in these regions to be forbidden [Barbieri et al. 1994]. However, marriage traditions have manifestly modified, and quite independently of legislative measures. In an initial phase, the marrying age of men and women rose as a pure consequence of legal constraints, while the difference in age between men and women hardly changed at all, testifying to the persistence of the traditional model. To observe any real change you have to wait until the 70s, when there was a convergence of the ages between men and women. Analogously, the temporality of the transition of fertility is hardly different from that in neighbouring countries outside the USSR. Although the means of limiting births differed greatly, although the policy enacted had almost nothing to do with developing family planning, the transition of fertility in the mid-70s began at a relatively rapid pace. These are typical factors leading, essentially, to a rise in the level of education. There is hardly anything specifically soviet to them.

Hence this persistence of traditional forms, their modification within a framework that is in no way different to what one observes in developing countries of similar cultural backgrounds.

Autonomous European Societies

Finally, the last illustration of this demographic autonomy with regard to political constraints: the failing will of the State to change the behaviour of individuals within the European populations. In fact, the family or population policy measures taken during various periods of the soviet history had little effect. Very often one finds references to family upheavals that followed the revolution, to upheavals resulting from the changes in 1936, to the individualisation of the behaviour of those populations subjected to the actions of a State intent on their homogenisation after the Second World War. However, several indicators show that none of the above actually occurred. In Russia, the legislative somersaults concerning family planning (authorisation, prohibition, authorisation of abortion, hostility towards contraception) had no particular impact on fertility reduction, with the exception of the fluctuations of circumstances. The revolution no doubt accelerated this drop somewhat, but this trend had already started at the beginning of the century and continued independently of these factors [see, for example, Anichkin and Vishnevsky 1994]. The about-turn of 1936 only very briefly interrupted the already well-advanced fall in fertility. The demographic policy measures of 1981 had an equally ephemeral effect. Finally, the abrupt fall in fertility in Russia at the beginning of the 90s, even if partially attributable to a deterioration in living standards, is above all a consequence of readjustment, after several disturbances, to a behaviour generally accepted throughout Europe [see, for example, Avdeev and Monnier 1994]. The extended role of the family survived. Regional contrasts in terms of extra-marital fertility reflect traditional contrasts: Protestant and Scandinavian Estonia, for example, is remarkable for its very high level of illegitimacy before the break-up of the USSR, while catholic Lithuania has never known such behaviour as a general fashion.

It is true that the evolution of mortality is very particular. Here, the sign of soviet integration – comprising the European part of the USSR – is evident. It does not, how-

⁵) For a more detailed development of these questions, see [Blum 1994a].

ever, reflect a change in social dynamics. Mortality is doubtless the most dependent indicator on particular institutional forms. In terms of structure according to causes of death, characteristics particular to the various regions forming the USSR can be found. In terms of the level, on the other hand, one finds a clear result of the bankruptcy of a policy which placed the accent on medical technology, and thus lost sight of the social dimension of the process.

All this therefore shows clearly that the social relations and social practices were much less disrupted than legal constraints or contemporary discourse and descriptions would have it. One realises that the debates, the description of family forms – produced as much by the soviets as by Western observers – are much more reflections of the official changes than reflections of reality. The rupture does not exist in the long term, even if in the short term the fluctuations are strong. Of course, everyday life has been changed profoundly, demographic catastrophes have struck whole families, disrupted generations. However, these disruptions to individual trajectories did not take the path proposed, imposed, by political decisions. Society tried to ignore them as they were too far removed from everyday preoccupations, they were foreign to the modes of thinking of the people of these regions. The representation those in power made of the world they dominated did not correspond with what it really was and, indeed, was too far removed from it. The study of the statistical formulation and its representations could allow for a better understanding of it.

Demographic statistics and the impossible construction of a state⁶

The history of demographic statistics in the Russian Empire is quite different from that of a country such as 19th century France, where the strong links between the formation of a nation-state and the establishment of a statistical administration were emphasised over and over again.⁷ The ambition of statistics is not simply to count, but to achieve a uniform description, and hence representation, of society through censuses, surveys, and the regular collection of information from the entire territory. The understanding of the social at the heart of the nation implies the uniformisation, the objectivisation of the interpretative grid. These statistics are therefore constructed on the basis of a conjunction of the interests of administrators, prominent figures and the responsible politicians. The construction of the State is reflected here in the continuity and the superimposition of the three areas: those who make the decisions and those who observe and manage either at the national or local levels.⁸

In Russia, however, statistical endeavour of the 19th century scarcely had a national goal [see Avdeev, Blum and Troitskaïa 1994]. Of course, since Peter the First, the *revisii* have taken place successively, but were never destined to provide the statistical panorama of a nation, having rather an essentially fiscal goal. The first census covering the entire empire – in 1897 – seemed almost an oddity. It seemed beyond the logic of Russian power. Until that time, the production of detailed statistics of all the territory the Russian empire covered had been the object of several administrative attempts (often dispersed and abandoned), but more especially, of university academics. Statistical research, sometimes inspired by the engaged thought at the heart of the International Institute of

⁶) This section of the text is partially taken from [Blum 1994b].

⁷) See in particular [Desrosières 1994].

⁸) On this question in France, see, for example [Bourguet 1988, Rosanvallon 1990].

Statistics⁹, is clearly more the product of individual initiatives and individual relations with sociologists or Western statisticians – from German, the first director of a statistical office and a statistician of German origin, educated at the school of Gröningen [see, for example German 1819], to Ju. Janson [1892], including the first synthesising publication of demographic data [*Sbornik...* 1851] – than the logic of influential groups, at the same time members of the State, prominent figures and scholars, as often classified by Western statistical societies.¹⁰

This absence of centralised statistics that was being developed at the same time in Western Europe could be justified by the existence of an authoritarian power that feared the aim of the research. Such an explanation is, however, unsatisfactory. A strong state, that represents the territories it governs as unified within a national logic needs administrative statistics, even if it controls them.

An outline of the State statistics

The Russian revolution thus marks a significant rupture. Not so much, however, for those who were to construct the new institutions of demographic statistics – those who formerly worked in the regional statistical offices or on the statistics of the zemstvos. They were trained in the long European statistical tradition, their intellectual reference points were profoundly anchored in the work produced before the Revolution. Pavel I. Popov, the first director of the CSU, was in charge of the Tula government statistics; Vasilij G. Mikhajlovskii, responsible for the first soviet censuses, was director of statistics for the Moscow government; the statisticians invited to the first soviet congress on statistics after the Revolution, were all regional statistics authorities under the tsarist empire.¹¹ The works which serve as methodological references were for the most part written before the Revolution; even after modification, they could not be integrated into the new framework of thinking.¹² The bibliographical references are those from the great statistical manuscripts from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the most cited among them G. Von Mayr, A. Bowley, U. Yule or W. Lexis.¹³

On the other hand, the fundamental novelty lies in the fact that the government took these statistics on board in the thirst for knowledge of the country, in the implicit desire to unify – through a detailed account of the population – a territory that would

⁹) The congress of the International Institute of Statistics which took place in St. Petersburg has, without a doubt, had considerable influence in this direction. See, for example [Brian 1989].

¹⁰) For France and, in particular, the Société de statistique de Paris, see [Kang 1989].

¹¹) РГАЭ, ф. 1562, оп. 1, ed. khr. 30, “Учреждения и лица, коим посланы приглашения на Всероссийский съезд земских, городских и правительственных статистиков, 8-20 июня 1918 г. в Москве”.

¹²) See, in particular, the works edited or re-edited by A. A. Кауфман, *Теория и методы статистики*, Moscow, various editions before and after the Revolution; Н. А. Каблуков, *Статистика (Краткий очерк статистики народонаселения)*, Moscow 1918 (4th edition); А. А. Чупров, *Теория статистики. Статистика народонаселения*, Moscow 1900; А. Ф. Фортунатов.

¹³) For a history of Russian and Soviet statistics, see, apart from the previously cited works, М. В. Птуха, *Очерки по статистике населения*, Moscow 1960, reference work as well as, for example, Е. В. Плошко et И. И. Елисеева, *История статистики, финансы и статистика*, Moscow 1990.

thereafter really be perceived as national. The parallel between this genesis of national statistics and the statistical explosion that followed the French Revolution of 1789 is edifying. The censuses succeeded one another with the same failures, then the same success. The statistical annuals are numerous, touching all domains of social and moral statistics. They sought to serve as a guide for a policy which would be oriented on the observations and studies supplied by the statisticians. Thus a statistic was set up which reflected the desire to construct a modern State, a statistic which, in interpreting all it observed as social facts (Социальное явление), sought to establish itself as an administrative tool for the political world. The desire to create a distance from Western statistics does indeed exist, but discusses the law of large numbers or the average and, in reality, is hardly to be distinguished from discussions of the same questions taking place or having taken place in Western Europe, in the founding tradition and in its critique proposed by Quételet or developed by Durkheim. This statistic discusses Galton or Pearson as, for example, is testified by the proposition – elaborated at the time of the first congress on statistics after the Revolution – to establish a working group on correlation.¹⁴

A New Formulation of statistics

The period of statistical explosion, an indicator of the modern State as in the West, was of short duration. The political hardening at the end of the 20s was accompanied by research whose orientation allowed a distancing from Western science.¹⁵ A new phase was entered when N. Osinskij published various works and brochures in which he opposed compatibility (Учет) and statistics (Статистика) and developed the idea according to which, in a socialist society founded on planning, the latter gave way to the former. He called this the death of statistics (умирание статистики) [Osinskij 1932]. He perceived the impossibility of extending this theory to social phenomena, and yet his text was to become the compulsory reference for works that were to follow such as those by Starovskij [1936] or Wojarskij [1931]. The transformation of the CSU (Центральное Статистическое Управление, that is, the Central Office of Statistics) in CUNKhU (Центральное Управление НародноХозяйственное Учета, or the Central Office of Economic Accounting) is explicit proof thereof.

These new theoretical references did not really modify the groundwork carried out by statisticians at the end of the 20s on the population, in particular that work on the collection and initial processing of demographic data. The change was more to be found in the publicity surrounding these references, in the uses they were put to by the political world, in the goals to which the administration of demographic statistics was consecrated. Two sources allow for precise evaluation: the demographic reports and the type of data used and exploited. The demographic reports sent from 1933 onwards to Stalin or Molotov by the CUNKhU Department of Population continued to describe a deteriorating situation, underlining the very marked rise in mortality in 1933, without, however, using the word “famine”.¹⁶ Other internal reports within the statistical organisation provide

¹⁴) РГАЭ, f. 1562, op. 1, d. x.

¹⁵) A general process which also touches scientific disciplines [see, for example, Graham 1987, 1993].

¹⁶) Cf. various reports in РГАЭ, f. 1562, op. 329. See, for example, f. 1562, op. 329, ed. 107, l. 90-95: Докладная записка о естественном движении населения в период между двумя переписями, 17/12-1926 и 6/1-1937 г., sign. Kurman, сов. секретно, 4. экз., sent to Kraval'. Ф.

analogous reflection.¹⁷ The basic statistical information continued to be collected, worked upon and presented to the political power, in spite of the catastrophes they revealed.

In this respect, 1933 seems pivotal. In demonstrating that statistics cannot avoid describing processes denied by the political power, they become the object of distrust and tension. In the first, this tension was made visible through conflicts between administration – in particular between the NKVD, responsible for the ZAGS (organs of the civil state) and, thus, for the collection of demographic data, and the CUNKhU, responsible for the elaboration of the data.¹⁸ These often violent conflicts did not, however, lead to any particular repression until 1937. That year saw these tensions come to a head dramatically. The course of the 1937 census shows with even greater clarity that statistics on the population could not answer to the responses of power. What followed is well known: the repression that struck many of those responsible – they were shot or deported – and the new census of 1939.¹⁹ The statistical administration was definitively transformed then, in its relations to politics, in the administration of recording figures, but not in interpretation. In this first role, however, it carried out its task rigorously. Is it not surprising to find a series of reports destined to control and improve the quality of death records when they were seeking to show a rapid drop in mortality? How to explain that on the whole the 1939 census was done correctly, even if, at the end of the process, a certain number of manipulations allowed for it to be better adapted to the demands of the relevant politicians?²⁰

Statistics become recording

Prudence and attention to political discourse are best perceived in the progressive disappearance of an interpretation in favour of a simple description. Recording continued with rigour, the various tasks carried out were from that time to be distinguished by the disappearance of the social as the object of statistics, by the disappearance of interpretation. With forward planning managing society, regular compatibility alone became necessary. The idea of power is therefore that society is managed, is no longer active. Thus a considerable hiatus between action (political) and reaction (social) is introduced, society no longer recognising itself in the image created by political discourse and in the legislative machinery issuing from it. Several examples bear witness to this, two of which are particularly revealing. The 1937 census documents the supposed disappearance of the

1562, оп. 329, ед. х. 107, л. 134-139, *Естественное движение населения СССР за 7 месяцев 1936 г. (Обзор)*

¹⁷) See, for example, *Воспроизводство населения Ленинградской области (без Ленинграда) в 1934 год*, f. 1562 оп. 329, d. 107 l. 2-11. Sign. Серов, начальник Лен. обл. и Гор. управления Нарховучета, Le 17.9.35. Секретно, 1 экз.

¹⁸) See, in particular, РГАЭ, f. 1562, оп. 329, ed. khr. 107, l. 120-127, “Докладная записка о состоянии учета естественного движения населения”, the report sent by Алиевский, Head of the Department of Civil State Laws at NKVD, at Ягода, director of NKVD, February 19, 1935.

¹⁹) The works dealing with the censuses of 1937 and 1939 are now numerous. See in particular [Volkov 1990; Andreev, Darskij and Kharkova 1990; Poljakov and Zhiromskaja 1994]. Also see [Weathcroft 1990; Adamets, Blum and Zakharov 1994] as well as the works by V. N. Zemskov on the statistics of the NKVD.

²⁰) On this point, see in particular Molotov’s instructions by which the sheets of the consensus were to be transferred from Siberia to the Ukraine. (РГАЭ, f. 1562, оп. 329, rd. khr. x).

social classes to later retract this notion in its codification plan. Those articles which allude to this overturned in a rather extraordinary manner the logic of description: social classes were no longer present in the census, this proved that soviet society is a classless society...²¹ Here one can see the trap into which numerous western observers have fallen when they describe, right up until the disappearance of the USSR, soviet society as a non-stratified, homogenised society. This homogenisation is in fact the product of a new construction designed to describe society and not a profound modification. Given that social stratifications were no longer measurable, this illusion was of considerable significance. There is nothing to show, however, that they have not persisted. The contemporary explosion of differences, the rising to the surface of complex social groups, of networks based on pre-existent stratifications which occurred at the fragmentation of the Soviet Union indicate quite the contrary.

The tensions between administrators and politicians

The statistical administration's treatment of the question of nationality also reveals the contradictions and tensions existing between administrators and politicians. At the end of the 30s, those conducting the 1939 census had to elaborate a dictionary of nationalities: the one used in 1937 (completed in 1934) was considered or must have been considered substandard as the entire 1937 census was cancelled. Thus the organisers of the census were confronted with two influences, two constraints. The first held to Russian ethnographic tradition which has its own particular criteria for defining peoples; the second stemmed from the political texts, obligatory references, in particular Stalin's, which specified the terms of nationalities and ethnic groups. They therefore had to adapt to an abstract and strongly political definition. Thus, the CUNKhU, the Institute of Ethnography and the Institute of Languages and Mentalities began corresponding with the Academy of Sciences. This correspondence shows the various levels of constraint governing the establishment of such a grid:

“As the basis of the list is the division of the peoples of the USSR into three principal categories:

1. the nations, national groups and peoples;
2. the national minorities having no precise geographic regroupment on the national territory of the USSR (republic, national oblast' or national okrug);
3. ethnographic groups.

To establish the list of nationalities, we have taken as a base the understanding of the nation as given by I. V. Stalin [...]”²²

In another document, they observe that

“The list was based on the distinction between nation, people and national group. In practice, however, we were compelled to make a fourth distinction: that of the ethnographic group for which it is indispensable to conduct analyses at the beginning of the census as numerous aspects of the national composition of the USSR have turned out to be particularly difficult to earmark in the first groups cited.”²³

²¹) “Перепись населения социалистического государства.” *Правда*, April 29, 1936.

²²) РГАЭ, f. 1562, op. 336, delo 208, l. 33-43.

²³) РГАЭ, f. 1562, op. 336, delo 208, l. 53. “Explanatory Note on the Project of the List of Nationalities” (29/06/38).

Behind this would-be intangible principle, however, numerous difficulties arose in the interpretation of the relation between the “official” definition and the real application of distinctions in a definition that was to operate at several levels. This led to enormous difficulty in integrating all the peoples (for the most part registered on the 1934 list) in one or another of the predefined categories. The list proposed by the census office was sharply criticised as much by the Institute of Languages and Mentalities as by the Institute of Ethnography. Beyond the criticism made at a level of scientific analysis befitting ethnographic research at that time (equivalence of denomination etc.), the criticism shows a real fear of not endorsing what would be an official criterion. After a series of written consultations, the CUNKhU arrived at the implied conclusion that the criteria were not applicable and justified the solution of a simple alphabetical list:

“All the nationalities (155) and all the languages (141) in the Soviet Union are included in the list, independent of their size. [...]

The peoples and languages of the Soviet Union are classified in alphabetical order. We have come to the point where we refuse to re-examine a scientific classification reflecting the peoples and languages. The creators of the list do not have the power to do so.

Nor have we been able to specify groupings to the peoples of the USSR or from the point of view of well-known historical categories: nation (nationality), national group and ethnic group. Although the nation is [...] (Stalin), the creators of the list do not have sufficient material for the criteria.”²⁴

This official statement of failure was the supreme legitimisation of the Central Office of Statistics’ abandonment of classing nationalities according to ethnographic and anthropological criteria. Thus whereas in 1926, the nationalities were regrouped in the lists according to the criteria of proximity, from 1939, they were to be regrouped, like the republics, according to criteria such as the number of people within these nationalities. The categorical definition was irrevocable, the administrators restricted by them, and yet the criteria no longer functioned.

What State?

What is a state then if there is no longer a fusion between the policy-making and the work of the administrators of the statistical organisms? Must one see in this disassociation the survival of a group of men who believed in the existence of a State in the Western sense of the term? If so, one observes a “phantom state”, founded on a network of administrators and universities operating like a state, but who have absolutely no political decision-making power and who are ignored by the political world. This coexistence sometimes recalls the existence of these local statistics which dominated the imperial Russian world, but which never resulted in the production of a unified and national image of the territory. At the same time, these statistics can be distinguished. Local statistics were the product of a close liaison with local decision-making organs. Soviet statistics are centralised, removed from local organs. Even so they do not play an active, unifying role. On the one hand, local administration carries out the censuses, yet they never get to know the detailed results, which are kept in Moscow. On the other hand,

²⁴) ПГАЭ, f. 1562, op. 336, delo 206, l. 120-143.

Moscow gathers and keeps the results without making much use of them bar a few specialists in each domain who are permitted to manipulate and exploit them.

The 30s bear witness to this fundamental rupture affecting the relationship between administrators/statisticians observing the society and the policy-makers who ignored it increasingly. Thus, if the “facts which did not match up [...] were treated as untrue” as Hannah Arendt claims in the above-cited text, this was not the case for the administrators, and information on the diverse catastrophes afflicting the country had for a long time been transmitted to the policy-makers, even if the interpretative grid had been changed and this change were responsible for rendering them less and less intelligible. Apart from a few exceptions, there had been no real falsification as far as demography was concerned. There had been occultation, there were attempts to modify representations, but that is all. Moreover, the study of representations specifies a contradiction which will scarcely be resolved between the government and the logic of the administrators inscribed in the 19th century European tradition.

Conclusion: a few lines of research

In this text, we have not deepened any particular aspect of the questions we have raised. On the contrary, we have proposed a rapid survey of the various paths of investigation which seemed to us to have been given priority in a demographic approach in order to provide the fundamental elements for debates on the respective place in Soviet history of society, the state and administration. Three complementary points of departure could be prioritised today:

1) A deeper study of the statistical administration allows for the rearrangement in a precise institutional framework the relation between politics and society. It allows for the question as to the nature of the structure of the state which was established, only to crumble, after the Revolution. It would be based on a precise examination of the intellectual formation of the producers of the figures; of the logic of the importance of political constraints on both the people themselves and the renewal of cadres and the manner in which one may or may not speak of a deterioration of the qualification and a politicisation of the cadres; on the place of administration within the State and, finally, an examination of the real information on the political power and the use it makes of this information.

We believe we have shown that the study of the production of demographic statistics provides a framework for reflection appropriate to the research on the role of the administration, on the nature (indeed the existence) of a state in the modern sense of the term and, more generally, on the relation between the political world and society as mediated by the administration. A strong dissociation between an administration destined, after the Revolution, to run a modern state and the political world, which, after several years, renounced this state from the 1930s onwards, and especially from 1933. Claude Ingerflom and I entitled one of our articles “Forget the State in order to understand Russia?” [Blum and Ingerflom 1994]. Behind this undoubtedly somewhat provocative formulation, we wanted to express succinctly that Russian and Soviet history cannot be limited to a history of the political world. A significant autonomy subsisted and the very construction of the state in the modern sense of the term is problematic. It cannot be considered a given.

2) The study of short- and long-term demographic dynamics seems to be a complex reflection of the various political and social ruptures afflicting Russia between 1917 and

1950 and characterised by a series of huge demographic catastrophes as well as fluctuating debate and legislation on demographic behaviour. By placing in perspective these ruptures and the evolution of the main demographic behaviour, such as marriage and the constitution of families, fertility and death, one can come to a subtle understanding of the consequences of these catastrophes and political and ideological upheavals on individuals, on their place within society, on social relations themselves.

3) Finally, historical demography allows us to reconstruct social relationships and stratifications beyond the representations deformed by the utilisation of categories designed to display an homogenous, immobile society. It aims, in fact, to highlight the full scope of individuals' chosen paths and the relationships which interlink various paths through, for example, marriage. In effect, one of the principal problems the historian of soviet societies runs into is the permanent modification of the analytical framework without so much as being able to distinguish whether these modifications are merely the product of a change in the representation or the expression of deep-seated upheavals.

Towards a comparative history?

All these orientations, this inscription of soviet history within logics which are not so far removed from processes occurring elsewhere in Europe show, furthermore, that it is not possible to deal with these questions without a comparative outlook on the European states which themselves were establishing ever larger administrations. In this respect and by way of conclusion, I want to underline an important question. Tackling the history of the 20s and 30s and Stalinism in particular from a comparative perspective is already an a priori. There are many who consider Stalinism, like nazism, to be of an *exceptional* character and that to apply the same tools used elsewhere, to make a comparison is to deny its exceptionality. We know how much this debate with regard to nazism caused outrage in Germany - indeed, it was at the centre of the "historians' quarrel" (*Historikerstreit*). In his work, *What is Nazism?* [Kershaw 1992], Jan Kershaw sums up well exactly what was at stake here: what role can society play in a unique and apparently asocial phenomenon? Can one "make history" in depolemising in classical fashion or does the uniqueness of both the phenomenon and the drama necessitate a different approach in which the moral point of view cannot be rejected? Can we deal with this period in the same way as we do the 16th century?

All these questions are being posed, only differently, about Stalinism. However, I do believe that to follow a comparative approach is not to deny the exceptionality of Stalinism, rather that its exceptional character often divulges processes observed elsewhere taken here to their extreme. Furthermore, the history of the 20s and 30s allows for an explanation of administrative logics, in particular in their relationships to politics as well as to scientific and intellectual dynamics.

Two types of comparative research should therefore be conducted. The first would consist in comparing the intent to construct a statistic which would give coherence to the states which arise in the wake of revolutions in France after the French Revolution and in Russia after the Russian Revolution. This comparison is even more interesting in light of the explicit Bolshevik references to the French Revolution are, moreover, explicit. The second type of research should acknowledge in what way the administrative dynamic of

soviet statistics can in fact be incorporated into analogous constructions observed in Europe in the same period.²⁵

ALAIN BLUM is a director of research at the Institut National d'Études Démographiques (INED), associate researcher at the Russian centre of the EHESS, and lecturer at the École Polytechnique and the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO). His main publications include *Naitre, vivre et mourir en URSS*, Paris, Plon, 1994; *Démographie et politique en Russie, Problèmes politiques et sociaux. Serie Russie, 711, La documentation française*, Paris, 1993; *J. L. Rallu and A. Blum (ed.), Démographie européenne, Volume I, INED/John Libbey, 1992; Volume II, 1993*. In addition, he has published numerous articles in various demographic and socio-historical reviews on the history of the population and statistics of the USSR, on demographic history and the like.

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²⁵ On France, see for example, [Desrosières 1994].

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