Now that the results of the 1979 Soviet census have been published, scholars in virtually all of the social sciences will study the ethnic and linguistic data therein. Comparisons and contrasts will be made to similar data already published in the 1926, 1959, and 1970 Soviet censuses, and to a lesser extent the Imperial Russian Census of 1897. Although all of these are excellent sources of data for ethnic groups of the USSR, their use is not unproblematic. As Stanley Leiberson points out, "census data on language are of great value for many socio-linguistic problems when investigators are aware of the difficulties and pitfalls in their usage."  

This problem is especially acute when dealing with the growing reliance on quantitative and statistical methods in the social sciences. As a result of the great number and variety of peoples in the USSR, there are apparent problems confronting the user of these census data. These problems fall into three basic categories: 1) comparability of data; 2) grouping of data for analysis; and 3) bias in interpretation. These factors lead to misinterpretation and outright error. Some of these difficulties in data usage and suggested methodologies are here presented, in hopes that it may lead to improved scholarship in the field of Soviet nationality studies.  

Voluminous ethnic and linguistic data are presented in all of the Soviet censuses. Unfortunately the level of reporting varies from one census to another. The criteria for considering a people as a distinct ethnic group also vary. The number and boundaries of the given administrative units have changed frequently, especially in the predominantly Islamic regions of the USSR. All of these factors present problems in comparability of data over time.  

In addition, the administrative boundaries of ethnic territories (SSRs,
ASSRs, and AOs) often do not correspond to the actual traditional distribution of the ethnic groups. As a result, many members of a given group find themselves outside the officially recognized boundaries of their respective homeland. In the interpretation of ethnic data of the USSR, then, one must be careful not to make the assumption that a person listed as living outside his or her ethnic territory is a migrant. Thus, for example, there are hundreds of thousands of Uzbeks living in traditionally Uzbek territories that today, as a result of boundary policies, are within the boundaries of the Tadzhik, Kirgiz, Kazakh, and Turkmen SSRS. Although they live outside of the Uzbek SSR, they cannot be considered migrants.

Comparability of Data

The problem of comparability of ethnic groups over time is especially acute. As E. Glynn Lewis indicated, "since the criteria employed in interpreting the affiliations of the population have been changed, it is difficult to relate estimates of the number of nationalities and of their sizes which have been produced at different times." As a result, in 1926–194 distinct ethnic groups were recognized, in 1939 only 70, in 1959–109, in 1970–105, and in 1979–101. In effect, in 1897 individuals were asked what they considered their native language, and this was considered the basis of ethnicity; in 1926 the question was phrased "what is your narodnost'" and the census taker decided the person's ethnicity, and in 1959, 1970, and 1979 the question was phrased, "what is your natsionalnost'" and was self-identificatory. Any meaningful comparisons must take these changes into account. The following examples illustrate these problems.

The Uigur example is the most striking. A mere comparison of the figures for the Uigurs in 1926 and 1959 implies that their population increased from 42,550 to 95,208 over this period. In 1926, however, the Uigur population was listed as three distinct peoples: Uigurs (population 42,550) Taranchi (53,010), and Kashgars (13,010), a total of 108,570 peoples. Rather than increasing in population, as the figures for Uigurs alone imply, they experienced a substantial decline.

The example of the Tatars is also important. In 1926 the Mishars, who numbered approximately a quarter million, and the Kryashens (Christian Tatars), who numbered more than 100,000 were listed separately, whereas in


4. The number of ethnic groups for 1979 was taken from the listing of nationalities as reported in *Vestnik statistiki*, No. 7 (1980), pp. 41-43.

5. The Uigurs were under strong assimilation pressure by the culturally and religiously similar Uzbeks and Kazakhs. The subsequent large increase in population (after 1959) resulted from a substantial immigration from China.