



# MEASURING THE NATION

Collecting, Interpreting, and Digital Processing of Historical Data

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Conference organised by the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences in cooperation with the German Historical Institute in Warsaw and the Mazowieckie Samorządowe Centrum Doskonalenia Nauczycieli.

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- Research in the field of digital humanities, which has been developing for at least a dozen or so years, apart from obvious common features, also has disciplinary and regional specificity. In the field of history and related sciences, its subject matter often includes mass sources produced by the state, both pre-modern and, to a much greater extent, modern. Their digitisation, processing and appropriate dissemination serve research purposes as well as the promotion of knowledge and civic attitudes, expressed, for example, in involvement in the protection of local cultural heritage.
- In East Central Europe, the potential for compiling such data is very high for historical reasons, especially for the 19th and 20th centuries. The land empires present in this region had an extensive bureaucratic apparatus and collected more statistical information about their subjects than the colonial empires of France and Great Britain, where censuses did not include ethnic categories.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, state structures faced competition in the form of social initiatives carried out by participants in national movements without their own state. In the case of Polish and Czech lands, such activities resulted in ambitious encyclopaedic projects, such as *the Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego* (1880–1902) or *Ottův slovník naučný* (1888–1909), and even alternative statistics to the official ones, based on official data but subjecting them to further processing and interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Ethnic conflicts significantly shaped the internal politics of the Reich, the Russian Empire and Austria-Hungary, providing incentives for competition in the field of collecting and publishing large data sets on population, cultural heritage and the economy. Scientific and documentary projects thus took on political significance, which they have retained to some extent to this day.

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Blum, *Resistance to Identity Categorisation in France*, in: *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Census*, ed. David Kertzer, Dominique Arel, Cambridge 2002, pp. 121–147.

<sup>2</sup> Morgane Labbé, *La nationalité, une histoire de chiffres. Politique et statistiques en Europe centrale (1848–1919)*, Paris 2019.

- Even before the digital revolution in the publication of historical data, there was a shift in the history of the broadly understood human sciences, including statistics and cartography. The pioneers of *New Economic History* used the analysis of mass sources to verify deeply rooted judgements about economic relations in the past.<sup>3</sup> In the history of geography, researchers such as John Brian Harley saw maps as normative elements, not so much a reflection of social reality as attempts to actively shape it. Maps, i.e. spatial representations of statistical data, are, in Harley's terms, "social constructions of the world expressed through the medium of cartography."<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, the mass sources produced in the 19th and 20th centuries are a component of the modern pursuit of order and control.<sup>5</sup> They are an irreplaceable source for studying the processes of knowledge production and the worldview of their creators, but their direct informational value is questionable. This is due, for example, to the widespread use by 19th- and 20th-century scholars of top-down categories that do not always reflect the complex identity of individuals, as well as, for example, the rejection of the possibility of national indifference or multiple identities.<sup>6</sup>
- The significance of new research trends is not limited to demonstrating that data produced over a century ago is unreliable (due to deliberate distortions or unintentional errors). Earlier researchers were also aware of this and often undertook to reinterpret historical information in accordance with their own knowledge and intuition.<sup>7</sup> This was often successful; for example, historical demographers developed very precise mathematical tools that allowed them to correct historical data within the limited scope of population movement.<sup>8</sup> However, according to the position of critical historiography, such calculations do not translate into qualitative information or an understanding of the categories used to describe past reality. The past hidden behind mass sources cannot always be caught up with and verified. However, as the latest works in the history of science prove, it is possible to focus on the practices of knowledge creation, offering readers a cultural history of statistics, cartography and major dictionary projects.<sup>9</sup>
- Within this research field, extreme positions are strongly represented. On the one hand, there are researchers who believe that the digital processing and sharing of historical mass data is primarily a technical challenge. From this perspective, the only problem worth considering is the transfer of data from one medium (tables, dictionary entries, etc.) to a database and then to an application available to users. At the other end of the scale, we find scholars who are distrustful of historical data, treating it merely as an illustration of past practices of knowledge production and the exercise of power. Between these extremes lies a wide field of analysis

<sup>3</sup> Jan Pomorski, *Paradygmat "New economic history": studium z teorii rozwoju nauki historycznej*, Lublin 1995, especially pp. 110–114.

<sup>4</sup> John B. Harley, *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, ed. Paul Laxton, Baltimore – London 2001, pp. 35–36.

<sup>5</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Ithaca 1991.

<sup>6</sup> See Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948*, Ithaca 2008.

<sup>7</sup> The works of Jerzy Tomaszewski, e.g. *Mniejszości narodowe w Polsce XX wieku*, Warszawa 1991, are a fascinating record of such calculations.

<sup>8</sup> Cezary Kukło, *Demografia Rzeczypospolitej przedrozbiorowej*, Warsaw 2009, pp. 25–35.

<sup>9</sup> Recently, for example, Philipp Kröger, *Das vermessene Volk. Nationalitätenstatistik und Bevölkerungspolitik in Deutschlands östlichen Grenzländern 1860–1945*, Göttingen 2023.

and source editing, developing its own research tools and methods and using technological developments such as artificial intelligence to extract both information and meaning from them.<sup>10</sup>

- The interdisciplinary conference *Measuring the Nation: Collecting, Interpreting, and Digital Processing of Historical Data* will provide a platform for discussion between representatives of various disciplines and research traditions working with mass sources on East Central Europe and beyond produced in the 19th and 20th centuries. The meeting of researchers, sometimes representing extremely different approaches to sources, is not intended to develop a uniform position. Instead, it will result in an open catalogue of research questions and practices, taking into account the different sensibilities of historians of ideas and economics, source editors, historical demographers, digital humanities specialists, and cultural studies scholars. The conference will be accompanied by educational and promotional activities. The aim of these activities will be to sensitise teachers to the epistemology of digital sources used in school education.
- The organizers of the conference *Measuring the Nation: Collecting, Interpreting, and Digital Processing of Historical Data* invite proposals for 15–20 minute presentations on the topics outlined above. Please send your topic and a short abstract (100–200 words) in English to [measuringnation@ihpan.edu.pl](mailto:measuringnation@ihpan.edu.pl) by the end of April 2026.

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<sup>10</sup> See, among others, the cyclical conferences of the Department of Auxiliary Sciences and Methodology of History of the Institute (currently the Faculty) of History of the University of Warsaw, organised since 2015. The 2018 edition was devoted to mass sources, „Źródła masowe XIX i XX wieku – formy udostępniania” [Mass Sources of the 19th and 20th Centuries – Forms of Accessibility] as well as the cyclical conferences of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in the “Editiones sine fine” series, most recently: *Editiones sine fine*, vol. 3, ed. Tomasz Kałuski, Karol Nabiałek, Katowice 2024.



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