Numbering and measuring has become one of the modern state’s obsessions in order to know more about its people. During the course of the 19th century the census therefore became the prime key to direct social policy, to control diverse groups and to base eventual political demands on solid data.

However, those, asked for their age and profession, their language, family status or religion did not always placidly answer these questions when the censor knocked on their door. Particularly in the highly politicized regions of the Habsburg empire the census became a hotly contested battlefield of conflicting demands for national representation and cultural autonomy.

This paper attempts to compare the census of two European empires, that is the Habsburg monarchy and Tsarist Russia. Of particular interest will be which meaning the imperial people gradually attached to the census and how they responded on the will to classify from above by taking action from below.

A short outlook will draw the attention to the “imperial legacies” of the census in the successor states of both monarchies in the 20th century and ask for continuity and change.