

A Beginner's Guide to Eastern European Genealogy

by Stephen J. Danko, PhD, PLCGS

The Basics of Eastern European Genealogy

A community survey of the ancestry of the population of the United States performed in 2006 showed that in a population of 299,398,485, an estimated 6,834,657 people identified their primary ancestry to be Polish, 2,186,872 Russian, 957,522 Czech, 947,375 Hungarian, 692,098 Ukrainian, 506,910 Slovak, 439,202 Lithuanian, 358,464 Eastern European, 329,200 Romanian, 226,024 Czechoslovakian, 81,330 Bulgarian, 65,368 Latvian, 20,964 Estonian, 7,206 Carpatho-Rusyn, and 1,683 Soviet Union. These groups roughly correspond with the countries classified as Eastern European countries by the United Nations Statistics Division.

Genealogical research in Eastern European countries is frequently approached with uncertainty, if not outright dread. The prospects of trying to find and understand records written in a foreign language coupled with the relative inaccessibility of many of the records in Eastern Europe is certainly reason to give many people misapprehensions of starting to research ancestors from Eastern Europe.

Nonetheless, research on ancestors in Eastern Europe can be conducted by genealogists who know little of the native language as long as three essential pieces of information are known: the name of an ancestor, the approximate year of an event in that ancestor's life, and the location in which that event took place.

For those who have these three pieces of information, the path to research ancestors in Eastern Europe may be relatively straightforward. The most commonly used records to research Eastern European ancestry are church records and civil registration records. Unfortunately, in most places, the more recent church records and civil registration records may not be open to the public. On the bright side, however, the greatest influx of Eastern European immigrants to the United States occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and their records in their Eastern European homelands may, indeed, be available.

The Family History Library (FHL) in Salt Lake City, Utah boasts a collection of over 2,400,000 rolls of microfilm, many of which are microfilmed copies of church records and civil registration records. Several countries in Eastern Europe are well represented in the microfilm collections of the FHL, providing genealogists with ready access to these valuable records through local Family History Centers all over the world. The catalog of available microfilms is online at <http://www.familysearch.org/>.

Once equipped with the microfilms, one can search the records. Even if a researcher can't read the language in which the records are written, many are written using the Latin alphabet, and so the researcher can at least recognize the names in the records.

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Location, Location, Location

The strategy for finding records in Eastern Europe, whether by searching for them in person, by mail, or by using the FHL microfilms involves, first and foremost, knowledge of the location where the records were recorded. Most commonly, the records were recorded in the church or synagogue to which the ancestors belonged. The location of the vital events in an ancestor's life, therefore, is one of the most important pieces of information to have.

Americans researching their immigrant ancestors should first research American records to learn names, dates, and locations relevant to their searches for records in Eastern Europe. Such records as census records, draft registrations, birth records, baptismal records, marriage records, death records, obituaries, immigration records, naturalization records, and personal family papers may all provide clues to finding information in Eastern European records.

Even after finding relevant records that list the location for a birth or marriage in Eastern Europe, one must still learn where the ancestor's church or synagogue was located. Most villages in Eastern Europe do not have a church or synagogue in the village itself, but rather the residents all traveled to a nearby village to attend services. It is in the churches and synagogues that the records were kept, and it is the village in which the church or synagogue was located that the genealogist must find.

The easiest way to find the name of the village in which the church or synagogue was located is to use a gazetteer (geographical dictionary) for the appropriate region and time period. Some examples of gazetteers include the *Słownik Geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego* (Poland and surrounding territories such as Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine), *Spis Miejscowosci Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej* (Poland), *Administratives Gemeindexikon der Cechoslovakischen Republik* (Czechoslovakia), and *Magyarorszag Helysegnevtara Ket Kotreten* (Hungary). All these gazetteers are available through the FHL and the local FHCs.

Most of these gazetteers are written in the local languages, but many of the microfilmed copies include instructions for use in English. In most cases, the gazetteers provide the location of the parish church or synagogue to which each village belonged. In many Eastern European villages, most residents were members of a single religion: Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, or Evangelical Lutheran, for example. In those locations where the population was divided among two or more faiths, the researcher must know the religion of the ancestor in order to find the correct records.

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But the Borders Changed!

Alas, the problem with historic locations is that, throughout history, borders changed as invading armies took possession of new lands and as nations reorganized their administrative structures after establishing strategic alliances with other countries. These border changes and reorganizations affected the types of records maintained, the languages in which they were maintained, and the locations at which they were archived.

By far, the most significant border changes in Eastern Europe occurred in the territories now occupied by Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia, although border changes affected every country in Eastern Europe.

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Eastern European History in a Nutshell

When researching Eastern European genealogy, researchers will find a study of history helpful in understanding the changes in the borders and administrative structure of the country over time, the changes in the languages in which genealogically relevant records are written, and the formats of the records themselves.

Some of the most significant events in the history of Eastern Europe, with an emphasis on the countries of Poland, Lithuania, Russia, Prussia, Austria, Belarus, and Ukraine, include the following events:

- In 966, Mieszko I, duke of the Slavic tribe of Polans, converted from paganism to Christianity. This event would have great implications for future record keeping in Eastern Europe, resulting in church records used by genealogists to trace their ancestry.
- In 1385, the Union of Krewo was signed between Jadwiga, daughter of the King of Poland, and Jogaila, Grand Duke of Lithuania. The Union of Krewo brought the two rival nations of Poland and Lithuania together in a close partnership.
- In 1545, the Council of Trent was convened as a response to the Protestant Reformation. At the Council of Trent, Roman Catholic priests were ordered to maintain records of baptisms and marriages in order to know who had received the sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church.
- In 1569, the Union of Lublin established the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, resulting in the formation of the largest country in Europe. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth encompassed much of what are now Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Belarus. Also included in the Commonwealth were the western half of Ukraine and part of Russia.
- In 1648 the Khmelnytskyi Uprising was a revolt of the Cossacks in Ukraine against the Polish nobility. The uprising significantly weakened the power of the Polish nobility and, as a result, the Commonwealth itself.
- In 1655, Sweden and Russia invaded and occupied the Commonwealth. This period of war and occupation was known as the Deluge, and the Commonwealth was further weakened.
- In 1772, Russia, Prussia, and Austria conspired to take advantage of Poland's feuding nobles and the weakened position of the Commonwealth itself. The three empires together claimed about a third of the Commonwealth and split the new acquisitions among themselves. This event is known as the First Partition of Poland.
- In 1793, in the Second Partition of Poland, Russia and Prussia again invaded and claimed another third of Poland. At this time, Austria was embroiled with problems within the Austro-Hungarian Empire and declined to participate in the partition.

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- In 1795, the Third Partition of Poland was conducted. This time, Russia, Prussia, and Austria divided all remaining lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth among themselves. Austria established a system of civil registration in the territories it controlled, whereby vital records were maintained in Latin by the Catholic priests. Neither Russia nor Prussia established civil registration at this time, but records of births, marriages, and deaths were generally kept by local parish priests anyway.
- In 1807, after Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Prussia, The Duchy of Warsaw was created from territories previously annexed to Prussia from the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Napoleon established a system of maintaining civil registrations maintained by Roman Catholic parish priests who were designated as Civil Registrars.
- In 1815, after the defeat of Napoleon, the Congress Kingdom of Poland was established by the Congress of Vienna. The borders of the Congress Kingdom of Poland were essentially the same as those of the Duchy of Warsaw. Through this action, Poland regained some autonomy. The territory, however, was administered by Russia.
- In 1832, Polish and Lithuanian soldiers and citizens rebelled against the control of the Russian authorities in a revolt known as the November Uprising. The Uprising was crushed by Russia and, as a result, the Congress Kingdom of Poland was officially incorporated into Russia with the Organic Statute of the Kingdom of Poland.
- In 1863, Polish citizens again rebelled against the Russian authorities in the January Uprising and, like the November Uprising, the revolt was crushed by Russia. After the failed January Uprising, Congress Kingdom of Poland ceased to exist, and became the Vistula Land of the Russian Empire. Russian became the official language for civil registrations and other official purposes.
- In 1918, as a result of World War I and the retreat of Russia from Poland, the Central Powers reestablished Polish independence and the Second Polish Republic was created. The territory of the Second Polish Republic included lands recovered from Russia, Prussia, and Austria.
- In 1939, after secretly agreeing to split Poland between them, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Poland. Slovakia also invaded Poland from the South.
- In 1945, Poland's borders were redrawn at the Yalta Conference. Poland gained previously German land to the North and the West, but lost considerable land to the East. In the end, Poland had won the war, but lost 20% of its territory and became a satellite state of the Soviet Union.

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The Records

By far, the most easily accessible and useful records for Eastern European genealogy are the records of Birth/Baptism, Marriage, and Death. After the Council of Trent, Roman Catholic parishes were expected to maintain records of the sacraments, and it is these records that are the earliest extant records for most Eastern Europeans.

The earliest records (from the 17th and early 18th centuries) were maintained in Latin, the language of the Church. Different parishes began to keep these records at different times, and the earliest records contain only a minimum of information. Sometimes, the records were written in Polish.

With the Partitions of Poland and subsequent political events came changes in the records.

Austrian Partition: The format and content of the records in the Austrian partition were mandated by the Austrian government. Fairly detailed records, including names of parents and sometimes grandparents were written in Latin in a columnar format. These records were maintained in essentially the same format into the early 20th century. Until 1869, the Roman Catholic parishes were also required to maintain records of the births, marriages, and deaths of non-Catholics, although this requirement was not frequently practiced. The records from the Austrian partition were almost never indexed.

Russian Partition: After the arrival of Napoleon and the creation of the Duchy of Warsaw, in 1808 a Napoleonic style of record keeping was mandated by the state, which used the parish records as civil registration. Long, detailed paragraphs were written for each birth/baptism, marriage, or death. These records include much information of genealogical value, including names, dates, ages, occupations, names of parents, and names of witnesses. After the defeat of Napoleon and the creation of the Congress Kingdom of Poland, records in the Congress Kingdom continued to be maintained in Polish, using the Napoleonic style. The failed January Uprising of 1863 was to have repercussions, however. By the 1870s, the Russian government required that all official records be kept in Russian, although the Napoleonic format remained intact. Frequently, these records were indexed annually, and a cumulative index was usually prepared every decade.

Prussian Partition: The earliest church records were maintained in Latin, Polish, or German. There was no state mandated civil registration until 1874, and so the records in the Prussian partition are not as detailed as in other partitions. Records in Roman Catholic parishes were usually written in Latin or Polish. Records in Lutheran churches were usually written in German. These records were rarely indexed.