



# Germans from Russia: Contacting Archives

Russia “How to” Guide, Intermediate Level: Instruction

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## GOAL

You will be able to:

- understand the Russian archival system of фонд/fond, опись/opis, and дело/delo.
- know how to use the FamilySearch Wiki to locate information about archives applicable to your region.
- use the Russian letter writing template to submit a research request to an archive.
- know some basic tips and guidelines regarding visiting an archive.

## INTRODUCTION

If you are unable to find records for your Germans from Russia ancestor using published works or online resources, it might be time to turn to an archive. Archives collect and preserve original documents of organizations such as churches or government, and there are several archives located in Russia, Ukraine, and the former Soviet Union that contain records pertaining to Germans from Russia.

It's a common misconception that the Soviets systematically destroyed all genealogical records from the Russian Empire. In fact, the Soviet government did quite the opposite - metrical books, revision lists and other records were gathered, collected and preserved in state historical archives throughout the Soviet period. For example, the State Archive of the Saratov Oblast, an archive that holds many important Germans from Russia genealogical records, was established during the Soviet period.

Before contacting or visiting an archive, be sure that you have completed all the research you can in online and printed sources. To learn more about Germans from Russia research, you may want to consult the following “How to” Guides:

- [Locating the Town with Websites and Gazetteers](#)
- [Black Sea Germans: Published Records and Indexes](#)
- [Online Resources for Volga Germans](#)
- [Revision List Records](#)
- [Locating Church Records](#)

You do not need to speak Russian to work with a Russian archive, but some familiarity with the language may be helpful. You may want to consult the following “How to” Guides before continuing:

- [The Russian Alphabet](#)
- [Deciphering the Handwriting and Understanding the Grammar](#)

## HOW TO

Russian archival material is organized by фонд/fond (ф.), дело/delo (д) and опись/opis (о.). The fond, and delo are similar to a library call number while the opis is necessary for locating a specific record in an archive.

### **Фонд/Fond**

The records in a фонд/fond are simply the records of a specific organization, portion of an organization, or an individual. An institution creates records for its own purpose and use. When the administrative or personal value of the records expires, they are transferred to an archive. Church records are often grouped together in one fond - for example, Lutheran church records may be grouped together in one fond, while Catholic records may be found in another.

Archives may also create fonds containing records of differing authorship that are filed together based upon a logical or thematic basis. Thus, fonds can contain records of more than one religious denomination.

Fonds are often described in путеводители/putevoditeli. Putevoditeli are essentially guides or findings aids to archival holdings. They help the reader understand what kind of materials and/or year ranges are contained within the fond. Some putevoditeli are available only at the archive while others have been published online.

### **Дело/Delo**

The individual item in a fond is a дело/delo, which can be translated as a file or volume. Each delo is given a title or number based upon the record type and contents. For example, church records from a specific parish could be considered as one delo. Within the delo, contents may be numbered with a page number, often referred to as the лист/list, or the page, sheet or leaf number. Items are usually filed chronologically by the earliest year of information found in that item. They may also be called единица хранения/storage unit (often abbreviated simply as ед. хр.). Items are usually filed chronologically by the earliest year of information found in that item.

### **Опись/Opis**

The inventory of files in a fond is known as an опись/opis. While a fond is a statement of authorship, an opis is a statement of content. An archive may have an established fond or collection, but as time goes on, more records that would fall under that fond are added to the archive. The opis is an inventory of the documents submitted to the archive at one time. They are essentially an index or inventory of individual delo, or packets of documents. As such, the opis is the key to finding records in a fond and is considered the most significant finding aid used by researchers. Some opis are available only at the archive, while others have been published online.

A fond may have more than one opis. These sometimes reflect different types of material or blocks of material accession by the archives. The decision as to what to include in an opis is in the hands of the archival cataloger and will vary significantly from archive to archive.

References to materials from Russian archives will generally follow a citation in this format:

[Archive Initials], Ф. [fond number], О. [opis number], Д. [delo number].

Example: ГАГО Ф. 637, О. 19, Д. 122.

## Germans from Russia Archives

There are a number of archives that contain information pertaining to Germans from Russia. To see what archives are available for your area, use the [Germans from Russia Archives and Libraries](#) page on the FamilySearch Wiki. Visit [familysearch.org/wiki](http://familysearch.org/wiki) and in the search box, type in *Germans from Russia Archives and Libraries*. Under the heading **Archives in Russia, Ukraine, and the Former Soviet Union** you will find a table called **Archives by Region**. Locate your region and use the table to see which archives may hold records pertaining to your ancestors. Archival descriptions, contact information and helpful links are also found on the Wiki page.

Many archive websites are in Russian. You do not need to know Russian in order to explore their websites – simply use Google Translate to assist you. When using the browser Google Chrome, right click anywhere on the page and select the option **Translate to English**. Alternatively, you can copy the URL of the website you wish to translate and go to [translate.google.com](http://translate.google.com). Change your language settings to translate from Russian into English and paste the website URL into the Russian box. Then click on the link found in the English box. This will take you to a translated version of the website.

## Writing to an Archive

Do not assume that archive employees will be able to speak and/or read English. As a general rule of thumb, you should write your request in the language of the archivist - for example, if you are writing to an archive in Russia, you should write your request in Russian. You can include a copy of your letter in English below the Russian translation. If the archive writes back in English, you may correspond in English.

You do not have to speak Russian in order to write to a Russian archive. In general, online translators such as Google Translate can be useful as long as you use short, simple, and concise sentences. Complex ideas or flowery words can be difficult to translate. You may want to follow the general outline below and fill in the blanks with information specific to your situation. Some of the blanks require you to put words in genitive or prepositional case. To learn more about this, please see the [Reading Russian Documents: Deciphering the Handwriting and Understanding the Grammar](#) “How to” guide.

Russian	English
<b>[1] Директору архива</b> [Archive Initials]	<b>[1] To the Archive Director</b> [Archive Initials]
<b>[2] От</b> [Your full name and contact information]	<b>[2] From</b> [Your full name and contact information]
<b>[3] Заявление</b>	<b>[3] Statement</b>
<b>[4] Добрый день!</b>	<b>[4] Good day!</b>

<p><b>[5] Прошу Вас мне помочь в генеалогическом поиске.</b></p> <p><b>[6] Мой</b> [relationship - grandmother, great-grandfather, etc.],</p> <p><b>[7]</b> [full name of ancestor in both Russian and German], [religion (in genitive case)]  <b>вероисповедания,</b></p> <p><b>[8a] родился</b> (if your ancestor was female, use <b>родилась</b> instead)</p> <p><b>[8b] женился</b> (if your ancestor was female, use <b>вышла замуж</b> instead) [name of spouse (in genitive case)]</p> <p><b>[8c] умер</b> (if your ancestor was female, use <b>умерла</b> instead)</p> <p><b>[9] в</b> [name of colony/parish in both Russian and German (in prepositional case)],</p> <p><b>[10] в</b> [date of birth, marriage, or death].</p> <p><b>[11] Прошу, используя имеющиеся в Вашем архиве метрические книги в</b> [fond and opis number if available, and/or any other additional information],  <b>сообщить мне сведения</b></p> <p><b>[12a] о его</b> (if your ancestor was female, use <b>её</b> instead) <b>родителях.</b></p> <p><b>[12b] о его</b> (if your ancestor was female, use <b>её</b> instead) <b>браке.</b></p> <p><b>[12c] о его</b> (if your ancestor was female, use <b>её</b> instead)</p> <p><b>[13] Пожалуйста, пришлите мне копии имеющихся документов.</b></p> <p><b>[14] Оплату гарантирую.</b></p> <p><b>[15] С уважением,</b>  [Your full name]</p>	<p><b>[5] I request your help in my genealogical search.</b></p> <p><b>[6] My</b> [relationship - grandmother, great-grandfather, etc.],</p> <p><b>[7]</b> [full name of ancestor in both Russian and German], [religion (in genitive case)]  <b>religion,</b></p> <p><b>[8a] was born</b></p> <p><b>[8b] was married to</b> [name of spouse (in genitive case)]</p> <p><b>[8c] died</b></p> <p><b>[9] in</b> [name of colony/parish in both Russian and German (in prepositional case)],</p> <p><b>[10] on</b> [date of birth, marriage, or death].</p> <p><b>[11] Please use the metrical books available in your archive in</b> [fond and opis number if available, and/or any other additional information],  <b>to locate proof of</b></p> <p><b>[12a] his/her parents.</b></p> <p><b>[12b] his/her marriage.</b></p> <p><b>[12c] his/her death.</b></p> <p><b>[13] Please send me a copy of any available documents.</b></p> <p><b>[14] I guarantee payment.</b></p> <p><b>[15] Respectfully yours,</b>  [Your full name]</p>
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Visit the [Germans from Russia Archives and Libraries](#) page on the FamilySearch Wiki to see an example of an inquiry to an archive and some additional vocabulary that you may find useful.

## Tips for Visiting an Archive

In some cases, it may be necessary to visit an archive personally to obtain the desired record. Getting the most out of your archival research trip takes careful planning and preparation. Below you will find some tips to help you as you prepare to visit an archive.

- **Contact the Archive:** Inform the archive of the dates you plan to visit and what materials you would be interested in viewing. You may need to set up an appointment with the archive or the Читальный зал (the reading room). Archivists will generally bring documents and archival manuscripts to the reading room for visitors to use. Be sure to know what the reading room hours are so that you can maximize your research time.

- **Apply to Visit the Archive:** In some cases, you must submit an application to obtain a reading card and access to the archive. This can take anywhere from a few days to a few months, so be sure to ask the archive about the process well in advance. Applicants are typically asked to provide contact information, forms of identification, reasons for visiting the archive etc.
- **Plan Ahead:** Planning ahead will help you get the most out of your experience. Examine putevoditeli and opisi before your visit so you know the fond and delo number. Knowing these "call numbers" will allow the archivist to quickly retrieve your desired records and you won't have to waste your or the archivist's precious time looking for its location within the archive.
- **Schedule Time for the Unexpected:** Give yourself some buffer time in case of travel complications, unexpected archival closures, or for new discoveries that lead you in a different direction than you had originally anticipated.
- **Review Guidelines:** Be sure you understand the archive's policies regarding their materials. Inquire if there any limits to the number of documents you can view each day, or if materials can only be requested as specific times. Also ask what kind of fees are necessary for photocopies, scans, or photography. You may also wish to ask if there are charging stations or internet access available. Knowing the policies in advance also helps you know what to pack for your visit. Commonly restricted items include pens, food/drink, coats and large bags. In some archives, electronic devices may not be permitted, so be sure to remember to pack pencils and a notebook.
- **Create a Template to Organize your Notes:** Keeping a research log is an important step in research and helps you stay organized. Prepare a template ahead of time to help you keep track of what you have looked at (fond, delo, information found on record etc.). Be sure to save a spot to cite your sources.
- **Travel:** Before booking your airfare or travel arrangements, be sure you are aware of any visa requirements. Ensure that your passport is up to date.
- **Transportation:** plan out in advance how you will get to the archive. You can use services like [Google Maps](#) or [2ГИС](#) (for Russia) to help you navigate public transportation. If you plan on driving to the archive, be sure to find out if there is parking available at or near the archive.