Germans from Russia: Locating the Town with Websites and Gazetteers

Russia "How to" Guide, Intermediate Level: Instruction

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GOAL

Determining the location of the hometown is essential to locating records and furthering your research. This guide will teach you how to use online resources, published works, and gazetteers to find the important religious and political jurisdictions that will help you locate genealogical records for your ancestor's hometown.

INTRODUCTION

Before beginning genealogical research, it is important to understand a bit about the location of the village and which religious and political jurisdictions existed at the time your ancestor lived there.

Russian Empire Jurisdictions

Church records were kept by individual parishes, while civil and taxation/census records were dependent upon political jurisdictions called *guberni* (singular form: gubernia), *oblasti* (singular form: oblast), *uyezdi* (singular form: uyezd) and *okruga* (singular form: okrug). The European, or Western Russian Empire, was divided into guberni, or states. The guberni were then further subdivided into smaller districts or counties called uyezdi. The Caucasus, Central Asia and Far East areas were also divided into states called oblasti, and counties known as okruga.[1]

English Term	European Russia	Caucasus, Central Asia and Far East
State	Gubernia/Governorate (губерния)	Oblast (область)
District or County	Uyezd (уезд)	Okrug (округ)

Soviet Jurisdictions

In the years following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (VGASSR) was created. The republic was divided into fourteen districts called cantons and you may find references to these cantons as you perform searches in online sources and published works. The VGASSR was dissolved in 1941 and became part of the Saratov oblast.

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[1] Sergei G. Pushkarev, *Dictionary of Russian Historical Terms from the Eleventh Century to 1917,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970); 28, 69, 74, 167.

Modern Jurisdictions

It is also important to understand the town's modern-day jurisdictions in order to locate which archive records may currently be stored in. As a result of the Russian Revolution, all Russian Empire states (guberni and oblasti) became known as oblasti, while the term uyezd or okrug was replaced with that of *rayon* (plural form: rayoni). Today, the Russian Federation is made up of several kinds of administrative districts including republics, oblasts, krais, federal cities and autonomous oblasts and okrugs. Understanding these modern-day jurisdictions will help you determine where records are currently stored.

English:	Russian:
Republic	Respublika (республика)
State	Oblast (область)
Territory	Krai (край)
Federal Cities	Gorod federalnovo znacheniya (город федерального значения)
Autonomous District	Avtonomny Okrug (автономный округ)
Autonomous State	Avtonomny Oblast (автономный область)
District/county	Rayon (район)

These jurisdictions – both historical and modern – can be located with the help of online resources, published works and gazetteers. Remember that even though the location of a village may not change, its political jurisdictions may change over time.

You may want to consult the following "How to" Guides before continuing:

- Finding German Colonies
- RGN Gazetteer
- *Spiski Gazetteer*
- The Russian Alphabet

HOW TO

The research process can be simplified into five main steps:
1. Begin with the Name of the Hometown
2. Online Sources
3. Published Works (optional)
4. Transliteration
5. Gazetteers

As you go throughout this process, be sure to write down alternate names and spellings for your colony (in both German, Russian, and English), political jurisdictions such as the gubernia and uyezd (or oblast and okrug), the predominant religion and parish, information regarding the founding and the modern-day location. These details will help you to locate records later on in

your research.
Step 1: Begin with the Name of the Hometown

- For this guide to be of most use to you, you should already know the name of the town you are looking for. If you have not yet determined your ancestor's hometown, please see the "Tracing Immigrant Origins" page on the *FamilySearch Wiki* for more information. The course, "Finding German Places of Origin" on the *FamilySearch* Learning Center may also be useful. Although the course is designed to aid a researcher in finding a German hometown, research principles and record types discussed still apply to Germans from Russia research.

Step 2: Online Sources

There are many resources available online to assist researchers in locating their ancestor's German colony. Many of these websites can be searched using the Ctrl-F feature. On a webpage, pressing the keys *Ctrl* and *F* (or *Command* and *F* for Mac users) at the same time will bring up a search box. Type what you are looking for in the search box and it will locate the text on the page. If you are unable to find your town, it may be due to a spelling error. If this is the case, try searching for just portions of the town name. If the town is still not found, try looking in other online sources or return to research in primary records to find more information on the hometown.

Links to the resources are included in this instruction guide and on the "Germans from Russia Gazetteers" page on the *FamilySearch Wiki*. The page also includes several additional resources, which are not include on this handout.

- **German Russian Village List**: The list, last updated February of 2012, includes the name of the village and the region and/or district. It may also include information regarding the parish, foundation year, prominent religions, longitude/latitude coordinates, alternate names or references to other useful sources. This document can be searched using the Ctrl-F feature.

    The German Russian Village List can be found using the following URL:
    http://www.blackseagr.org/pdfs/village_list.pdf

- **Germans from Russia Settlement Locations**: This website offers *Google* maps of German settlements throughout the Russian Empire based upon historical maps and community contributions. Town entries also provide information regarding name variations, foundation information, as well as the name of the gubernia (governorate) or oblast. The site is updated regularly, so check back often for new content.

    These maps are available at the following URL:
    https://www.germansfromrussiasettlementlocations.org/

- **Volga German Institute**: The Volga German Institute is an excellent resource for Volga German research. Use the gazetteer, located under the **Locations** tab, to search for localities. Entry pages typically include alternate names, Russian spellings, associated mother or daughter colonies, a brief history, information regarding the parish, population statistics and common surnames.

Access the website at: https://volga.domains.unf.edu/

- **Black Sea German Research**: This website includes links to useful websites and/or village lists for areas near the Black Sea. Click on the **Research** tab at the top right and choose the option **Area/town/village specific** to find resources for your locality.

    Visit their webpage at: http://www.blackseagr.org/

- **Volhynia**: This website is a useful resource for research in Volhynia. Use links under the **Geography** heading on the right-hand side to help you locate Volhynian villages.

    Access the website using: http://www.volhynia.com/

- **Search the Web**: Search the web to discover additional websites, or blogs for your town of interest. Go to a search page such as http://www.google.com. In the search box, type [name of town, Russia] or [name of town, Germans from Russia]. Even if your town name is slightly misspelled, search results should still appear. If a search returns no results, it may be due to a major misspelling of the German name. Use wild card searches, or if necessary, return to research in primary records to find more information on the hometown.

- **Wikipedia:** Go to http://www.wikipedia.org and type the name of the village in the search box, or use a search engine such as http://www.google.com to search for [name of village, Wikipedia]. If there is a *Wikipedia* page available, it may include a brief history as well as modern and/or historical jurisdictions. Pay careful attention to the references – they may help locate other information regarding the town.

- **Genealogical Societies**: Additional resources are available through genealogical societies such as the Germans from Russia Heritage Society, American Historical Society of Germans from Russia or the Historical Society of Germans from Poland and Volhynia. See their websites for more information regarding their services.[2]

- **Village Coordinators**: Many German colonies have village coordinators, or individuals with extensive knowledge of a specific colony. These individuals often know about families and surnames in the area, the location of the parish church, and where records are located/how to access them. Village coordinators can be located through genealogical societies or a web search.

Step 3: Published Works (Optional)

Published works can also be a great resource to find information about your ancestor's hometown. Many of these works are not readily available online. However, they are available at

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[2] *American Historical Society of Germans from Russia,* http://www.ahsgr.org.
Germans from Russia Heritage Society, http://www.grhs.org.
Historical Society of Germans from Poland and Volhynia, http://www.hsgpv.org.

the Family History Library or other major libraries and may even be available through ILL (International Library Loan). Contact your local county or university library for more details. If you do not have access to these books, move on to step four.

- ***German-Russian Handbook* by Ulrich Mertens**: this book includes an alphabetical index of German colonies. Typical entries include: the name of the colony, area in Russia, information regarding religion, founding year and population date as well as information about agriculture, schools, businesses etc. This book is available at the Family History Library reference desk.[3]

- ***The Emigration from Germany to Russia in the years 1763 to 1862* by Dr. Karl Stumpp:** Nicknamed the "Stumpp Book," this reference book includes a list of the mother colonies, followed by the name of the town in Russian, as well as the prominent religious denomination, founding year and population. This work is available at the Family History Library reference shelf or online if you are using a computer in the Family History Library in Salt Lake City.[4] This source is also free for members of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia in a searchable PDF format.[5]

Step 4: Transliteration

In order to progress towards the next step, locating the town in a gazetteer, it is important to know how the town is written in Russian characters. Some sources listed above may provide the name of the town with the Russian spelling, but if not, transliteration will be necessary. For those who do not read Russian, transliteration can be a difficult process, but, fortunately online resources allow you to easily move between languages.

- **Stephen P. Morse: Transliterating English to Russian in One Step**: this webpage allows the user to type the name in English and receive several Russian possibilities.

    Access online transliterations at: http://stevemorse.org/russian/eng2rus.html

- Online transliteration systems are helpful, are not always perfect. Consider using a transliteration table, such as the one found at http://www.rossica.org/transliteration.php, to manually transliterate your town name into Russian characters.

Step 5: Gazetteers

- ***Russisches Geographisches Namenbuch,*** otherwise known as the **RGN**, is an eleven-volume gazetteer compiled by Max Vasmer. The entries are alphabetically

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[3] Ulrich Mertens, *German-Russian Handbook* (Fargo, North Dakota: North Dakota State University Libraries, Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, 2010) FHL 947 F27m.

[4] Karl Stumpp, *The Emigration from Germany to Russia in the years 1763 to 1862.* (Lincoln, Nebraska: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1982), FHL 943 W2sk1978.

[5] For more information regarding the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia PDF option, please see http://www.ahsgr.org/page/Join.

organized (using the Cyrillic alphabet, except for places in Congress Poland, which use the Latin alphabet). RGN entries are in German and typically provide the pre-1917 jurisdictions of gubernia (G.) and the uyezd (Kr.). The *RGN* only provides information regarding political jurisdictions and references to other sources and gazetteers used in the creation of the *RGN*. The *Spiski Naselennykh Mest Rossiiskoi Imperii* was used as a major primary source for much of the information found in the *RGN*. For detailed instructions on how to use the *RGN,* please see the "RGN Gazetteer: How to Guide." The *RGN* is not available online. If you are unable to use the gazetteer at the Family History Library, consider using the *Spiski* gazetteer.

- ***Spiski Naselennykh Mest Rossiiskoi Imperii,*** or the ***Spiski*** gazetteer, is the most comprehensive gazetteer for the Russian Empire. Each volume consists of a gubernia or oblast of the empire. Therefore, in order to use this gazetteer effectively, it is necessary to know which gubernia or oblast your town was located in. The *RGN* provides a volume and reference number that can be used as a shortcut to quickly locate the entry in the *Spiskii*. If you do not have access to the *RGN,* use the alphabetical index at the back of the volume. Many *Spiski* volumes are available online and links are provided on the *FamilySearch Wiki* "Russia Gazetteers" page under the heading: **Spiski Online Availability**. For detailed instructions on how to use the *Spiski,* refer to the "Spiski Gazetteer Online: How to Guide."

Some key vocabulary for German colony entries in the *Spiski* includes:

Russian	English
кол. нѣм	German colony
Церковь католическая	Catholic church
Церковь лютеранская	Lutheran church
Училище	School

For the translation of other words, keep a Russian keyboard (an online version can be found at http://www.russian.typeit.org) and a translator such as Google Translate handy.

PRACTICE

Now that we have discussed the five-step process to locating the town, let's practice our skills! Follow the steps below to familiarize yourself with how to locate a town using websites, published sources, and gazetteers. You may find it useful to record your findings in this chart.

Colony Name	
Alternate Names	
German, Russian and English Spellings	
Religion and Parish(es)	
Foundation Year	
Region	
State and County	
Modern-Day Location	

Step 1: Begin with the Name of the Hometown

Figure 1. "Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Passenger Lists, 1883-1945," database with images, *FamilySearch* (http://familysearch.org: accessed May 2019); entry for Alexander Schmidt, image 642, FHL 1402604.

Click here to view the image.

- According to this passenger list, the Schmidt family was from Susanenthal, Russia. Keep in mind that spelling variations may exist.

Step 2: Online Sources

- Using the German Russian Village List, use the Ctrl-F search feature to search for the first few letters of the place name: "Susanen…" There are two close matches for Susannental, both located in the Volga region:

  o Winkelmann, also known as Susannental, was founded in 1767. The colony consisted of both Evangelical Lutherans and Catholics.
  o Susannental, a Catholic colony.

- Because both possibilities were in the Volga Region, let's search for Susannental in the Volga German Institute database. The entry for Susannental provides the following information:

  o Alternate place names are provided as well as Russian spellings. Winkelmann is listed as an alternate place name – establishing that the two entries in the Longer German Russian Village List are just one colony.
  o A brief history of the colony including details about its founding in 1767.
  o Details about Lutheran and Catholic religions in the colony. Prior to 1820, the parish was Bettinger. After 1820, the parish was Näb.
  o Common surnames and notable individuals – the surname Schmidt was a

- prominent surname in the area.
  - o Information regarding immigration of Susannental colonists to the United States.
  - o Population statistics across time.
  - o External links and sources which provide references for useful information.
  - o Maps and historical photos.

- To see where Susannental is located on a map, use the [Germans from Russia Settlement Locations](#) website. Scroll down until you find "Colony Group: Volga" on the right-hand side. Next, select "Alphabetical List of Colonies" and scroll down to find Susannental. The map shows us where the colony was located and the information in the left side bar gives us information about where the town is now located – Podlesnoye, Saratov, Russia – and information about the town's former jurisdictions.

- Use an online search engine such as [Google](#) to locate additional online resources. Enter "Susannental, Russia" or "Susannental, Germans from Russia." The blog Susannental: A German/Russian Volga Village provides a village history and description while an Ancestry message board entitled Germans from Russia/Susannental might allow you to connect to others searching for their ancestors in Susannental.

- Search for Susannental in [Wikipedia](#). The page provides modern-day jurisdictions as well as a brief history of the village.

Step 3: Published Works (Optional)

Now that we have searched for Susannental in online sources, let's move to published works. Many of these sources are not available online, but they are accessible at the Family History Library or other major libraries. If you are unable to access these sources, please move on to step four.

- Search for Susannental in Ulrich Merten's *German-Russian Handbook* (FHL reference book 947 F27m). Entries are organized in alphabetical order. Find the entry for Susannental, which states: "see Winkelmann." Next, find Winkelmann. This entry tells us that Winkelmann, or Susannental, was located in the Volga. It was a mother colony founded in 1767. The primary religion was Evangelical Lutheran and the parish was Näb.

- Next, try looking for Susannental in the Stumpp book (FHL reference book 943 W2sk1978). Entries are organized in alphabetical order. The entry for Winkelmann suggests the primarily Evangelical Lutheran colony was founded in 1767.

Step 4: Transliteration

- In order to progress to the next step – gazetteers, we must know how Susannental/Winkelman is written using the Cyrillic alphabet. The Volga German Institute website provided Russian spellings under the subject heading **Names**. Possible Russian spellings include: Сузанненталь, Сусанненталь, Винкельман, and Сосновка.

Step 5: Gazetteers

- **RGN:** This step will need to be completed at the Family History Library, or another location where the *RGN* is accessible. If you are unable to use the *RGN,* move on to the *Spiski*.

    1. The *RGN* is organized alphabetically. Locate the proper volume, in this case, volume 8.
    2. The entry for Сузаненталь refers you to Сузенталь.
    3. According to the gazetteer, Susannental is a German colony on the Volga.
        - Kr. = Kreis = Uyezd = Nikolajevsk
        - G. = Gouvernement = Gubernia = Samara.
        The contained information in parentheses is citations, indicating where the gazetteer makers based their data from.
    4. (Sam. Nr. 1623) is a reference to the *Spiski,* another useful gazetteer. This indicates that the entry for Susannental can be found in the Samara volume, entry number 1623.

- **Spiski:** Use the entry number found in the *RGN* to help you to locate the entry for Susannental in the *Spiski*. If you do not have access to the *RGN,* you must know the name of the gubernia (Samara) and use the alphabetical index located at the back of the volume.

    1. Visit the "Russia Gazetteers" page on the FamilySearch Wiki. Scroll down until you find the heading: **Spiski Naselennykh Mest**, and the subheading **Online Availability**.
    2. Find **Самарская г. Samara**. Clicking on the Russian characters will take you to the online version of the gazetteer.
    3. Scroll down until you see thumbnail images that look like tables. Select one of those pages.
    4. Pages are numbered on the far-left column. According to the *RGN*, Susannental will be entry number 1623. Use the arrows to flip through the pages until you locate entry 1623. The entry for Susannental is located on image 127 and includes the following information.

        - The heading indicates that the uyezd was Nikolaevsk.
        - The first column lists the entry number.
        - The second column includes the name of the colony (Susannental), and an indication that it is a German colony (кол. нѣм).
        - The third column includes the location, in this case, near the Volga.
        - The fourth and fifth columns indicate the distance from the county seat and the nearest train station.
        - The sixth column lists the number of buildings in the colony.
        - The seventh and eighth columns include the number of females and males living in the community.
        - The last column is reserved for details about the village: churches, schools, post offices, factories etc. According to the gazetteer entry, there was a school in Susannental.

Some sources indicated that Susannental was in the Samara gubernia while others suggested the town was in the Saratov gubernia. Visit the "Samara Governorate" page on Wikipedia to see

that the Samara gubernia was formed in 1851. Prior to 1851, it was a part of the Saratov gubernia.

By following the five-step process, your chart should now look like this:

Colony Name	Susannental
Alternate Names	Winkelmann, Sosnovka
German, Russian and English Spellings	Susannental, Susannenthal, Сузаннентальр, Сузенталь, Сусаннентальр, Сосновка, Винкельман
Religion and Parish(es)	Primarily Evangelical Lutheran; Pre-1820, Bettinger; Post-1820, Näb
Foundation Year	1767
Region	Volga
State and County	Samara/Saratov and Nikolaevsk
Modern-Day Location	Podlesnoye, Saratov, Russia

ACTIVITY

Now, test your skills you have learned in this "How to" Guide. The Activity is a way to check your knowledge and let you know you've mastered the Guide! Click here to try out the Activity.