

A short overview of German genealogy-related history

To understand German genealogical documents means to know something about German history.

Before the late 1800s there was no single country called Germany. There were German people and there was a German language spoken in at least 100 dialects, but they lived in a number of different kingdoms, principalities, duchies, etc. Each of these had its own local rulers and laws. Each of these is like a country of its own with its own customs, records, and particularities.

Key dates and events in German history that impact genealogical research:

- **1517** Protestant Reformation. The first significant non-Catholic religions began in Germany.
- **1524** Protestant church records began in Nürnberg.
- **1545-1563** Council of Trent. Catholic priests were ordered to start keeping baptism and marriage records.
- **1583** Catholic areas began using the Gregorian calendar.
- **1618-1648** Thirty Years' War. Many church records burned.
- **1722** Austro-Hungarian monarchs began inviting Germans to settle parts of their empire.
- **1763** Catherine the Great began inviting Germans to settle in Russia.
- **1771** Patronymic naming was abolished in Schleswig-Holstein (then part of Denmark).
- **1792** France started civil registration west of the Rhein. Some church records were interrupted.
- **1814** Napoleon weakened. German states began to reorganize under the leadership of Preußen.
- **1850** The Hamburg passenger lists began to document the origins or places of residence of Europeans leaving for the Americas, Africa, and Australia.
- **1864** Preußen conquered Schleswig-Holstein.

- **1871** Franco-Prussian War. Elsaß-Lothringen came under German rule.
- **1874** Preußen introduced civil registration
- **1876** Civil registration was required throughout Germany and began wherever it was not already in effect.
- **1914-1918** World War I. Elsaß-Lothringen was returned to France. Northern Schleswig-Holstein was returned to Denmark. Posen and parts of Schlesien and Westpreußen were ceded to Poland. Northern tip was given of Ostpreußen goes to Lithuania.
- **1939-1945** World War II. Ostpreußen was divided between Poland and Russia. Most of Pommern, Westpreußen, Brandenburg, and Schlesien came under Polish administration.

Ecclesiastical Records

Catholic	start in 1563, but large number destroyed in 30-Years-War (1618-1648)
Lutheran	start in 1524, but some destroyed in 30-Years-War (1618-1648)
Jewish records	start in early 1800s, before it sometimes registered in Lutheran or Catholic records