Volga German
Genealogy Research:
Documenting Your Ancestors Lives in America and Canada

CENTER FOR VOLGA GERMAN STUDIES
PORTLAND, OREGON
Maggie’s Volga German Genealogy Research Guide

Several years ago, I started thinking about preparing a guidebook that would be helpful to someone who was just starting to research their Volga German ancestors. The original plan was to provide tips on how to do genealogy research, working backwards in time, starting with records in America, then to records in Russia, and then to records in Germany. The emphasis would be on materials that would be most useful to someone whose ancestors were Germans who immigrated to Russia in the 1763-1767 time frame. The first part, records in America, was published as a series of posts on several Facebook pages in 2015 and 2016. The second part, records in Russia, and the third part, records in Germany, were developed into presentations that I have given at several CVGS and AHSGR conferences. At some point, I hope to summarize those presentations in written form, but that will require more work. Rather than wait until I get around to that, here is part about doing research in America. This consists primarily of the Facebook posts along with some of the associated images. This isn’t a completely exhaustive analysis of every possible source that might provide information about your ancestors, but it does cover the basic sources that will be useful to most people who are researching Volga German ancestors.

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Part 1: Document your ancestor’s lives in America

a. Start with what you know
Have you always wanted to research your ancestors, but didn’t know where to start? Start with what you know. There are two standard genealogy forms that will help you organize what you already know. One is called a “Pedigree Chart” and the other is called a “Family Group Sheet”. There are links to .pdf files of the forms below. Starting with the "Pedigree Chart", fill in your own name and personal data on the left hand side of the page. Then fill in the data for your parents, then your grandparents, then your great-grandparents. If there are any items missing, for example you don’t know someone’s marriage date, or you don’t know where someone was born, those are facts that you are going to research and fill in later. If you already know everything back to all of your great-grandparents, start a new sheet for each great-grandparent, repeating the same process for each great-grandparent. The "Family Group Sheet" is a way to organize what you know about a specific married couple. For example, pick one set of your grandparents. Fill in all of the information that you know about your grandfather and grandmother, and then fill in all of the names of their children (your aunts and uncles). Again, if you are missing any dates or places, these are the items that you are going to find as you research. At some point, you are going to accumulate enough data that you will want to put all of this information in a computerized genealogy program, but you don’t need to worry about that right now. Your first step is to identify what facts you already know and what facts you are missing. (If you are already using genealogy software, you can print these reports from your genealogy software.)
https://www.ancestry.com/cs/charts-and-forms

b. Interview the elders in your family
Now is the time to approach your senior family members to ask if you can interview them. I am extremely lucky that I have two older cousins (one on my mother’s side and one on my father’s side) who both had a life-long interest in family history. They both had interviewed our older family members and made careful notes of what they were told. Because they had expressed an interest in the elder family member’s lives, those cousins were the ones who were entrusted with the care of not just the memories, but also the collections of letters and photographs that those older family members had accumulated. You need to be that person in your family. You need to reach out to your elders and ask them about their lives, and ask them about the family stories they were told when they were younger. The people in your family tree are just a list of names and dates without the context of your ancestor’s lives. Here are a couple of articles from Family Tree Magazine that provides some ideas about how to interview your family members:
http://www.familytreemagazine.com/article/13tips-for-oral-history-interviewing
https://www.familytreemagazine.com/premium/20-questions/
c. 1. Names and spelling
Before we talk about different kinds of documents and where to find them, we need to talk about names and spelling. First, our Volga German ancestors were not very creative with names. There were a very limited set of first names that were used over and over again. If a child died, it was not unusual for the next child of the same gender to be given that same name. Typically children were named after their baptismal sponsors, and the sponsors were usually a family member. That leads to the same names being used over and over again in the same family. For example, I have 85 men named Jacob Bauer in my database. When you find a record with your ancestor’s name, don’t automatically assume it is the correct person. You also need to look at the person’s age, residence, spouse, and other facts to confirm you have found the right person. Second, don’t get too hung up on spellings. Before our modern era of Social Security cards and other identification that established the way our names would be spelled for the rest of our lives, spelling was flexible. In our Volga German context, you have the added complication of names being transliterated into Russian and then transliterated back to German or English. Russian and German both have several letters that do not have direct English equivalents, and English has a few letters that don’t have a Russian equivalent. If you are looking at Russian documents, or documents that have been translated from Russian, you should expect spelling variations. German also has several extra letters that we do not have in English, which will result in spelling variations. Don’t assume that a variant spelling automatically means that it is a different family.

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what you already have. You probably have your own birth certificate. You might have your parents’ marriage license, and if your parents are deceased you probably have copies of their obituaries and death certificates. How about your grandparents? What kind of records do you have for them? Take some time to gather what you already have, match it up with what you wrote down on your Pedigree Chart and Family Group sheets, and make a list of what you are missing.

c. 3. What is and is not on the internet
Isn’t everything available for free on the Internet? Don’t we all wish that were true! As an example of what you can find on the free search site Family Search, I ran a search on my grandfather, Heinrich (Henry) Hein. The image below is the result of that search. You can see that it brought up quite a few items. There are multiple references to the same obituary, a Find-A-Grave reference, my grandmother’s obituary, the 1910, 1920, and 1940 census (1930 is missing), and a reference to the Alien Case Files. What is missing? His marriage license, his WWI draft registration, his Social Security number application, the actual Alien registration file, his death certificate, and his probate files. If I run the same search on Ancestry (a subscription service), I am still not going to get some items, like the marriage license, the death certificate, the Alien file, and the probate files. An internet search is a great place to start, but it isn’t going to answer all of your questions, or provide all of your documents.

c. 4. Types of Genealogy Documents
i. Census records.
The easiest records for U.S. researchers to find are U.S. Census records. For Canadian researchers, many years of Canadian census records are also available. For Argentine
researchers of Volga Germans, the 1895 census is available. Images and indexes of census records can be found on a variety of genealogy web sites. Family Search is a free source, Ancestry is a paid subscription service. Knowing where your family was living at various points in time will help you locate other records such as birth and death records. Additionally, in the case of the U.S. census, there is quite a bit of useful data on the census in addition to names, ages, and birth locations. The 1910 U.S. census reports how many years the couple has been married, how many children the wife has had, the place of birth of the person’s parents, what year the person immigrated, and whether the person has applied for and received U.S. Citizenship. The 1920 U.S. census also reports immigration year and citizenship status, and includes the person’s mother tongue, and the mother tongue of the person’s parents. Start with the most recently available census year, which is 1940 in the case of the U.S. census. Search for all of your family members who were alive in that year. Make sure to view and save the actual image, not just the index. The indexes do not include everything that is on the census images, and it is not unusual for errors to occur in the indexing, so you really need to save or print out a good quality image of the census page. Work your way back through the years until you get to the first census after your immigrant ancestor arrived.

c. 4. i. Census records
A. Argentina Census
If you are researching people who migrated to Argentina, the 1895 Argentina census is available on Family Search. If you have an Ancestry subscription, the Argentina Census is available there also.
Argentina 1895 National Census on Family Search:
https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1410078?collectionNameFilter=false
Argentina 1895 National Census on Ancestry:
c. 4. i. Census records

B. Canada Census

For those of you who are researching ancestors who immigrated to Canada, there are a good selection of census records available to you. This page on the Family Search web site includes a chart that shows what years of census records are available at which web site. The chart includes links which will take you to the search page for each census. There are links to both free sources (Family Search and Library & Archives Canada) and subscription sources (Ancestry).

c. 4. i. Census records
C. United States Census
For those of you who are researching ancestors who immigrated to the United States, a census was taken in the United States every ten years, beginning in 1790. The most recent census that has been released to the public is the 1940 census. Our Volga German ancestors began to arrive in the U.S. in the mid-1870s, so the records you will be interested in are the 1880-1940 census. Unfortunately, the 1890 census was destroyed in a fire. Here is the link to the Family Search page that lists the available census records and provides links to access various web sites where these records can be found:

c. 4. i. Census Records
D. State Census
Many U.S. States have their own census records. If you can't find your ancestor in the Federal census, check to see if there is a state census for the place where they might have been living. This is especially useful for ancestors who came to the U.S. early in the immigration period. For example, some of the earliest Volga German immigrants to the U.S. settled in Nebraska and Kansas in 1875-1876. If your ancestor arrived in the 1880s, you are not going to find them in a Federal census until 1900 because the 1890 Federal census was destroyed. However, if your ancestor settled in Kansas, you can locate them in the 1885 and 1895 Kansas census. The image below is an example of a German-from-Russia family in the 1885 Nebraska census. Here is a link to the Family Search page about State census records, which includes links to the various state census records.
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Census_State_Censuses

![Image of 1885 Nebraska Census Record]

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c. 4 ii. City Directories

You have searched the census records, and you just can’t find your great-grandfather, even though you know he should be there. What do you do to confirm that he was living where you think he was living? Look at City Directories for the place where your ancestors lived. Years before having a telephone at home was common, local directories were published, listing household names and addresses, and including local businesses. The example here are my gr-gr-grandparents, Friedrich Engelman and Maria Koch. In the 1893 Hastings, Nebraska, Directory, several members of my family, including my gr-gr-grandfather, are listed. When I look at the 1898 directory, my gr-gr-grandmother is listed as “widow of Fred”. That tells me that Fred died sometime between 1893 and 1898. Where do you find City Directories? Do an internet search to see if the directories you are looking for are available for free on a public-access site (such as Archive.org). If you can’t find what you are looking for on a free site, there is a subscription web site called Fold3, which has a nice collection of city directories. There are also some city directories on Ancestry, and of course the Family History Library has a collection also. In addition, you might find that your local library or genealogy society has old city directories in their holdings or on microfilm.
c. 4. iii. Obituaries

A. 1. Reading old-style German fonts

Can you read this obituary, published in a German-Language newspaper here in the U.S.? If yes, great! You can read obituaries (or anything else) printed in the German-Language newspapers here in North and South America, including those that were widely read by the Volga German population on both continents. If you can’t read this obituary, you have a little bit of homework to do. The first step is to familiarize yourself with the font that these newspapers were printed in. The font is called “Fraktur”. This is the type-written version of “Gothic” German handwriting. Here is a link to a chart of the “Fraktur” letters from the BYU German Script Tutorial web site. You might find it helpful to print out the chart, study it, and see if you can convert this obituary into modern English letters. Remember that an “ä”, “ö” or “ü” with an umlaut over it (that’s the two little dots) is not the same as that letter without the umlauts. The German alphabet has 4 extra letters: the three umlauted vowels, plus the eszett (that’s the character that looks like a “B” with a tail), which is equivalent to a double-s. https://script.byu.edu/Pages/German/en/fraktur.aspx


Hastings, Nebr.

F. H. Ament, Pastor.

c. 4. iii. Obituaries

A. 2. Terminology commonly used in German-language obituaries

There were many German-language newspapers published here in the U.S. Some of the obituaries that will be necessary for your research may have been printed in the German language. You do not have to be fluent in German to read an obituary. You will have to know the German words for terms that commonly appear in an obituary – relationships (parent, spouse, sibling, child), events (birth, marriage, immigration, death), numbers, and dates. There

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are numerous books you can purchase, and many web sites that list common German genealogical words. The links below are just two of the numerous web sites that have fairly good lists of terminology. These lists are not comprehensive, but should cover many of the important words that you would find in the typical obituary. For single words and short phrases, typing into Google translate is an option also.
http://genealogy.about.com/od/germany/p/word_list.htm
http://www.rollroots.com/symbol.htm

c. 4. iii. Obituaries
A. AHSGR Obituary Collection on Family Search
The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR) has amassed a large collection of obituaries. There are more than 455,000 obituary images in this collection. If your ancestors were Volga German, it is likely that you will find an obituary for a family member in this collection. Several years ago, the collection was transferred to the Family Search web site, and is currently being indexed. Most of the English-language obituaries have been indexed, and indexing of the German-language obituaries is well underway. You can search the portion of the collection that has been indexed by following this link to the Family Search web site. It is free to search, and free to download the images.
https://familysearch.org/search/collection/2367299

Tips for searching the AHSGR obituary collection:
You can search the AHSGR obituary collection simply by entering a first and last name. You can input only a last name, but if you are searching for a common name, this may generate too many results. You are more likely to find the obituary you are looking for if you input additional details. For example, if you know where or when the person was born, under “Search with a Life Event”, click on “Birth”, and input the year and/or location. (See screen examples on next page). You can do the same with marriage, residence, or death years and locations. If you know the name of a family member, such as spouse or parents, under “Search with a Relationship”, click on the appropriate family member, and input the data you know. Notice that there is a small checkbox next to each input field. If you want to search using and exact spelling for what you have input, check that box. If you want to search for spelling variations, don’t check it. You should experiment with different combinations of input.
c. 4. iii. Obituaries

B. Historic Newspapers, including newspaper web sites

Another source for obituaries (and other news items about your ancestors) is Historic Newspapers. There are several challenges with locating historic newspapers. First, not all of the newspapers that have ever existed has been scanned and indexed into an online web site. Second, searching a newspaper web site isn’t as easy as searching a genealogy database. Your options for searching tend to be limited to putting in a person’s name, and possibly further limiting that by a geographic area and a time frame. I don’t want to discourage you from searching these web sites – they can be a great source – I just want you to have realistic expectations about how much of a challenge it might be to find anything. The link below is a web page has an enormous amount of information about using Newspaper Websites. There are lessons on how to do searches, and links to a multitude of other web sites. If you want to devote some time to learning about searching historic newspapers, I think this web page is a good place to start:

http://www.theancestorhunt.com/newspapers.html

c. 4. iv. Vital Records

Before we talk about Vital Records, let’s pause for a moment and review why we are spending all of this time (and sometimes money) to assemble this collection of documents. Your goal is to have all of the facts – names, dates, places – that you can glean from records here in the U.S. before you attempt to do any research in Russia. When we get into the details of obtaining records in Russia later, you will see why this is the case. The more facts that you have about your ancestors now, the better your chances are of finding relevant records in Russia later. So, what are “Vital Records”? These are official documents generated by a governmental entity. In the U.S., those would be records kept by a State or County Government. Records that fall into
this category are Birth Certificates, Marriage Licenses, and Death Certificates. Vital Records are a somewhat modern invention. Prior to the time that states and counties required reporting of births, marriages, and deaths, the only record of these events typically was a church record. If you are looking for an older record, the first thing you want to do is check to see when Vital Records were first required in the state where your ancestor lived. This Family Search Wiki has links to various state pages that will tell you what vital records might exist for the states that you are researching.


c. 4. iv. **Vital Records**

A. Where to Find Vital Records

Some States and Counties have provided their archival Vital Records to the big online genealogy web sites (such as Family Search and Ancestry). You might get lucky and discover that the image for a vital record that you need is available on one of these web sites. It is certainly worth searching those sites first to see what is there. However, for many vital records, you are going to need to contact the State or County Vital Records department to obtain these records. The simplest way to find the contact information for a particular vital records departments is a Google search. Say for example I wanted to know how to get a death certificate for someone who died in Colorado. I would Google “Colorado Vital Records”. DO NOT choose the results that say “Ad” in front of them. These are commercial services that are going to charge you an extra fee. The least expensive option is to go directly to the State or County. Each locality has different procedures and forms to fill out, and the cost per record varies. Personally, I would go to the County first and see if they have the records. Counties tend to be quicker about responding and sometimes less expensive.
c. 4. iv. Vital Records

B. Discrepancies in dates

As you assemble more documents, you are going to start to see discrepancies in birth dates among the various documents that you assemble. Don’t be alarmed by this. There are several reasonable explanations for why this might be the case. Until the Russian Revolution, Russia was still using the Julian (“Old Style”) calendar. By the time of the Revolution, Russia was 13 days behind Western Europe and the U.S., which was using the Gregorian (“Western”) calendar. Russia switched to the Gregorian calendar in 1918, by jumping from February 1 to February 14 in 1918. Basically, everyone born in Russia before that point lost 13 days. It is not unusual for someone to correct (or attempt to correct) their birth date to account for this. In addition to the differing calendars, problems with dates are caused by the traditional way of recording a person’s death. A typical death record states the person’s age in terms of how many years, months, and days that the person had lived. It is quite easy to make an error, either in the initial computation, or in later attempting to use that information to compute the person’s birth date. Here is an example of a computational error, using my great-grandmother’s records: Her death certificate says that she died on 14 April 1924, and that she was 72 years, 4 months, and 18 days old. If you use one of the online calculators to determine her birth date, you get either 26 or 27 Nov 1851 (depending on which calculator you use). However the person who filled out the death certificate says her birth date is 26 Nov 1852. In fact, her birth date is 26 Nov 1853, and I know that because I have an image of the baptism register. Her obituary in Kirchebote also provides the correct birth date of 26 Nov 1853. The bottom line is that once you assemble all of your documents, you may have a range of possible birth dates.

c. 4. iv. Vital Records

C. Death Certificates

The most common question that I ask someone who contacts me for help with their research is “do you have the death certificates for the people you are researching?” Ideally, a death certificate is going to provide the person’s birth date, birth location, maiden name for a woman, and parent’s names. This information isn’t always complete and accurate, but you should get the death certificates anyway just to see what they report. If your ancestors immigrated early, or were older when they immigrated, this could be the only item needed to connect your family into the 1857 Census of Volga Villages (more on why that is important later). For example, my great-grandparents were born in 1849 and 1853 respectively. Thus, they were both alive in 1857, and both are registered in the 1857 Russian Census for their villages. The death
certificates sometimes give only limited information, but in my case it was enough, in combination with their birth years, to identify exactly which family in the 1857 census that they each belonged to.

c. 4. iv. Vital Records
D. Marriage Licenses
If your ancestors got married here in the U.S., you should obtain copies of their marriage licenses. The information required to be reported on marriage licenses (and on license applications) varies depending on state and local requirements. Ideally, a marriage license (or the license application) will give the names of each spouse’s parents and the age of each spouse. Some jurisdictions also require the birth location of each spouse and their current residence. The images below are from my grandmother’s marriage license, and from my great-aunt’s (my grandmother’s younger sister) marriage license. This is a good example of why you should research your ancestor’s siblings, in addition to researching your direct-line ancestors, and why you should gather multiple documents to prove each data point. On my great-aunt’s license, she lists her mother as “Catherine Minch”. On my grandmother’s license, she lists her mother as “Mary Theil”. Which is correct? Their mother was Catharina Elisabeth Münch. She died shortly after my great-aunt was born, and their father married Anna Maria Thiel. I know this because I have church records and other data that provides these facts. If I had stopped when I found my grandmother’s marriage license, and not looked for other records, I would have incorrectly identified her mother.
c. 4. iv. Vital Records
E. Birth Certificates
For privacy reasons, birth certificates are probably the most difficult record to obtain. You should be able to obtain the birth certificates for your direct ancestors (parents, grandparents) born here in the U.S. Like all other vital records, the items required to be reported on a birth certificate varies by jurisdiction and time period. I was looking through my records preparing to write this and discovered that I only had one birth certificate for a Volga German family member – my own father. Unfortunately, the certificate that the State of Colorado sent to me is a typed transcription of the certificate, not an image of the original. An image of an original is always preferable, if it is available. Perhaps the fact that is a transcript accounts for the error in spelling my grandmother’s maiden name. I can’t explain the error in my grandmother’s birth location – surely she (or my grandfather, if he was the one who reported the data) knew that she was born in Russia, not Nebraska. This just turns out to be another example of why you should obtain multiple documents to prove each fact.

C. 4. v. Church records
I am going to spend quite a bit of time talking about church records when we get to research in Russia and Germany, but I don’t want to completely ignore them while we are still talking about U.S. records. Church records will have data that will parallel what is reported in Vital Records: a baptism record for a birth, a wedding record for a marriage, and a funeral record for a death. It is possible that the church record may have more details than the corresponding Vital record. The problem is that you need to know what church your ancestor attended. That may be simple in a small town with only one or two churches for each denomination, more difficult in a larger town or city with many houses of worship. The name of the church that your ancestor attended might be mentioned in an obituary, on a funeral record, or in a newspaper announcement about a birth or marriage. Here is an example of a case where the church record contained much more data than the obituary or the death certificate. These records are for my gr-gr-grandmother, Maria Magdalena (Koch) Engelmann. The death certificate was almost useless – it gave her age only. The obituary was interesting because it names her brothers who were living in the U.S., but it uses the Americanized “Cook” spelling. The church record, however, gives the correct spelling of her name, both maiden name and married name, and her date of birth.
c. 4. vi. Social Security Records
A. Social Security Number Applications

The information on a death certificate or an obituary is only as good as the knowledge of the person who submitted the information. That might be a family member who didn’t know the names of the deceased’s parents, or guessed at the spellings. I’ve seen numerous examples of death certificates with no parent’s names, badly misspelled names, or information that was simply wrong. Because of the possibility that the information on the death certificate might be missing or incorrect, I suggest to people that, if their ancestor was living in the U.S. after the Social Security system was established, they should request a copy of their ancestor’s Form SS-5. The SS-5 is the form that an individual would have filled out to apply for a Social Security Number (SSN). The individual would have filled out the SS-5 themselves, increasing the likelihood that the information would be accurate. The SS-5 form asked for the person's current name and address, birth name, birthdate, birth location, parent’s names, race, employer name and address, and the date they filled out the application.

Judy Russell, who blogs as the “Legal Genealogist”, has written an excellent article about the information reported on the SS-5 and how to obtain it. Rather than repeat what she has said, I am providing the link to her article. The quickest way to locate the person’s SSN and proof of death (which you will need to request the SS-5) is to locate the person in the Social Security Death Index (SSDI). The SSDI can be searched at Family Search (free) or Ancestry.com (subscription).

http://www.legalgenealogist.com/blog/2013/05/31/ordering-the-ss-5/
Online request form: https://www.ssa.gov/foia/request.html

B. Social Security Claims Index on Ancestry

Requesting a copy of your ancestor’s SS-5 as described in the previous post is almost always worthwhile because of the information that it contains. There is another database that you can search that may provide some of the data on the SS-5 without needing to request the form. Ancestry.com has a database called "U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007". According to the database description on Ancestry.com, not everyone who is listed in the SSDI is in this database, but the database now includes more than 49 million people. Information reported in this database may include applicant's full name, SSN, date and place of birth, citizenship, sex, father's name, mother's maiden name, and race or ethnic description. In addition, name changes are reported. If your ancestor happens to be in this database, you might be able to skip ordering the actual Form SS-5. One useful aspect of this particular database is that it records any name changes that a person reported to Social Security. So, in the case of a woman, the database will report any name change that she reported as a result of marriage or divorce. I don’t have any good examples of this on my Volga German side, so here is an example from another branch of my family. One image is the limited information reported in the Social Security Death Index, and the other is the much more robust data reported in the Applications and Claims Index (see next page).
c. 4. vii. **Military Draft Registration**

Another source for your male ancestor’s exact birth date, and sometimes birth location, is the World War I draft registrations. Our male immigrant family members registered for the WWI draft, even those who were not yet United States citizens, and some of them served in the military. The WWI registration cards can be searched in both Ancestry (subscription) and Family Search (free). Based on the cards that I have looked at, there appear to be two different versions of the WWI registration card. Both versions report the registrant’s name, date of birth, current home address, citizenship status, and current employer. One version asked for the nearest relative, and the other version asked for the name of the town where the registrant was born. Here is the link to the collection on Family Search and examples of both formats:

https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1968530?collectionNameFilter=true
c. 4. viii. Citizenship and Naturalization

A. Naturalization Records

1. United States

Many of our ancestors who immigrated to North America applied for citizenship and became naturalized citizens of the country in which they settled. Depending on the time frame during which their citizenship papers were processed, those files might contain a wealth of genealogical information. In the United States, the Naturalization Act of 1906 dramatically changed the process of becoming naturalized and the information reported on the forms. Prior to 1906, an immigrant could have had their naturalization processed by a federal, state, or local court, and the information reported on the forms was quite basic. After 1906, the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (now the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services or USCIS), took over the naturalization process. After 1906 there was considerably more detail required to be reported on the forms. Family Search has a nice summary of the naturalization process at different points in U.S. history, and links to searchable indexes here: https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/United_States_Naturalization_and_Citizenship

Here are examples of a pre-1906 naturalization record and a post-1906 naturalization record:
c. 4. viii. Citizenship and Naturalization
A. Naturalization Records
2. Canada
All of my Canadian ancestors were French Canadian, so I have to admit that I don’t have much personal experience researching Volga Germans in Canada. The Library and Archives of Canada has a searchable database of naturalization records for 1915-1951. There is an article on Family Search that summarizes the history of Naturalization in Canada and has links to additional information.


c. 4. viii. Citizenship and Naturalization
B. Alien Registration
1. United States
What about our ancestors who never became citizens of the U.S. or Canada? In the U.S., the Alien Registration Act of 1940 (also known as the Smith Act) required aliens aged 14 and older living in or entering the United States to register and be fingerprinted. If your immigrant ancestors never became naturalized citizens, and they were alive during World War II, they would have been required to register as Aliens. The files resulting from this registration process are called Alien Files or “A-Files”.

In order to determine if an A-File exists for your family member, you can search the “United States, Index to Alien Case Files, 1940-2003” on either Ancestry.com (paid subscription) or FamilySearch.com (free). The searchable catalog on the National Archives web site also includes the index of the A-Files. http://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/

If the individual was born more than 100 years ago, the files have been transferred to the National Archives in Kansas City. You must make your request by e-mail, postal mail, or fax in order to get the documents – there is no online ordering system for the A-files at Kansas City. Within a few weeks, you will receive either an e-mail or a letter informing you of the number of pages in the file and providing you with the total cost to send you the copies. The minimum charge is $20. http://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/aliens/a-files-kansas-city.html

A-Files not held at Kansas City must be requested via the Genealogy Service of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). Along with the A-Files not yet transferred to Kansas City, USCIS has other documents related to immigration and naturalization such as Visa Files, Registry Files, and Naturalization Certificate Files. http://www.uscis.gov/genealogy
What is included in an A-file? The Alien Registration Form (AR-2) asked for name and aliases, residence address, date and place of birth, country of citizenship, marital status, physical description, date of arrival in the U.S. and the port and name of the vessel, occupation, employer, U.S. naturalization status, memberships in clubs, organizations or societies, military service, arrest record, and political activities. Depending on how much interaction your family member had with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) the file might also contain valuable records such as visas, petitions and affidavits, correspondence, photographs, and vital records.

c. 4. viii. Citizenship and Naturalization
B. Alien Registration
2. Canada
For those living in Canada, an Alien registration system similar to the system in the United States was in effect during World War II. According to the Library and Archives of Canada web site, registration was required of all persons 16 years of age or older, between 1940 and 1946. The registration questionnaire included address, age, date and place of birth, general health, and occupation. For immigrants, the year of arrival in Canada and their parents’ country of birth are included. If your ancestor has been dead for more than 20 years, you can place a request with Statistics Canada to search this database, called the “National Registration File of 1940”. The charge to search for a record (at the time I wrote this) is $45 and the request can be made via Statistics Canada’s web site.

http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/olc-cel/olc.action?Objld=93C0006&ObjType=22&lang=en&limit=0

Prepared by Maggie Hein, 2015-2018. It’s o.k. with me if you share, as long as you give me credit. 😊
c. 4. ix. **Immigration**

A. **When did immigration to the Americas begin and end?**

Generally, immigration from Russia to North and South America began in the mid-1870s. Groups of scouts began travelling to the U.S. in 1874 to investigate the situation here. If your ancestors came from a Volga German village, you will generally be looking for ship manifests in 1875 and later. For the most part, the Russian Revolution in 1917 ended immigration from Russia. There were some people who were able to escape during the famine of the 1920s, but effectively that was the end of emigration out of Russia.

http://cvgs.cu-portland.edu/immigration/UnitedStates.cfm

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B. **No, your ancestor’s name was not changed at Ellis Island**

This is a common, and false story that is often repeated, and almost never true. The ship manifests were filled out in Europe, at the port of departure. No one at Ellis Island (or any other arrival port) was writing down names, thus there was no possibility of an immigration officer writing down a name incorrectly. You can read more about this here:

https://www.nypl.org/blog/2013/07/02/name-changes-ellis-island

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C. **Find the ship manifest**

What information is in the ship manifest? The level of detail on ship manifests varied over time. Manifests from the early years of immigration to the U.S. list name, age, sex, occupation, country of origin, and destination. For example, here is the 1890 arrival of my great-grandfather, Carl Engelmann, his second wife, and my grandmother and her sister.
Manifests for later years become much more detailed, with the information covering two pages. Here is an example of a manifest from 1907. The gives the exact town from which the immigrant departed, their place of birth, and the name of the family or friend that they were going to join in the U.S.

![Manifest Example](image)

c. 4. ix. **Immigration**

C. **Sources and Search Engines to locate ship manifests:**

1. **Steve Morse One-Step Web Pages**
   This is a fantastic web site with all sorts of tools in addition to the ship manifest search forms. If you don’t know exactly when your ancestors arrived, or where they arrived, you’ve got a variety of search forms to experiment with here. Try each one of them. If there is a dollar sign next to a form, that means that the form will take you to Ancestry, and you will need an Ancestry subscription to access the information. You will need a user name and password to access the Ellis Island database, but there is no cost to sign up for an account on the Ellis Island web site.

   http://stevemorse.org/

2. **Castle Garden**
   Castle Garden was in operation from 1820 until 1891. If your ancestors arrived in 1891 or earlier, they might have arrived here. Castle Garden has a searchable web site. The Castle Garden web site will provide you with a transcription of the data on the manifest, but not an image of the manifest itself. If you find a record that you are interested in, you can look at the original images in Family Search (under “New York Passenger Lists 1820-1891”), or on Ancestry.

   http://www.castlegarden.org/

3. **Ellis Island**
   Ellis Island began processing immigrants in 1892. Ellis Island has a searchable web site, which, similar to Castle Garden, will give you data extracted from the ship manifest. Ellis Island will also offer to sell you a copy of the manifest page. Similar to Castle Garden, you can look at the image of the manifest on Family Search or on Ancestry.

   https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/
4. Other Ports of Arrival
Don’t assume that your ancestors arrived in New York. There are many other ports that your ancestors could have used to enter the U.S. – Baltimore, Boston, Galveston, New Orleans, or Philadelphia are all possibilities. Here is another web site that provides lists and links for passenger lists,
https://www.germanroots.com/passengers.html

5. Arrival in Canada
Many Volga Germans settled in Canada. The Library and Archives Canada web site has searchable databases that you might find useful for genealogy research. On the main immigration records page, you will see that there is a database specifically for Immigration from the Russian Empire, in addition to the many other databases. There are also Canadian Passenger Lists on both Ancestry and Family Search.

6. Arrival in Canada, with later crossing to the U.S.
It wasn’t unusual for our Volga German ancestors to arrive in Canada first, and cross the border into the U.S. later. The lists of these border crossings have long been called the “St. Albans Lists”, after the Vermont border crossing of the same name. The databases of these crossings on both Family Search and Ancestry contain much more that just the crossings at that particular place in Vermont.
http://genealogyalacarte.ca/?p=9845

c. 5. Sources for documents
i. a. Family Search: Indexed Records
We are approaching the end of Part 1, so I want to wrap this up by going over sources for some of the documents that I have discussed in the previous posts. I have probably mentioned Family Search more frequently than any other source, and I have posted links to several of their online digitized and indexed databases. Family Search is free, and there is a huge amount of data there. You do not want to limit yourself only to documents that have been indexed there, but it is an excellent place to start. In order to search the records that have been indexed, go to the Family Search web site. Click on “Search” and then click on “Records”. In the “Search Historical Records” screen, you can fill in whatever information you have about the person you are researching – name, birth and death dates and locations, names of family members, etc. You might want to start with a
very broad search – just put in a name at first. If that gives you too many results that are not relevant, narrow the search by putting in more details such as dates and locations.

c. 5. Sources for documents

i. Family Search: Microfilms that are not indexed

If you have searched the indexed records on the Family Search web site, and you did not find any records for your ancestor, does that mean that there are no records about your ancestor in the Family Search collection? No. It just means that there are not in the records that have been indexed. The Family History Library has a vast collection of microfilmed records, and many of those have yet to be indexed. Since the time that I first started writing this guide, there has been a change in the Family Search policy regarding microfilms. As of Fall 2017, you can no longer rent microfilms and have them sent to your local Family History Centers. When Family Search announced this change, they stated that they planned to digitize the microfilm collection in order to make the images available online, and the target date for completion of that project is 2020. There are many microfilms that already have been digitized, and many more that still need to be digitized.

How do you figure out if records that you are interested in have been digitized but not indexed? Let’s say that you are researching an ancestor who you think was naturalized in Kansas, and need to figure out if Family Search has any records of Kansas Naturalizations. To do that, on the main Family Search page, choose “Search”, and then from that menu, choose “Catalog”. It defaults to searching by place name, so I would type “Kansas” in the box. That brings up a list of items that are available for Kansas. I page down until I see “Naturalization and Citizenship, and I click on that. That will open up a list of the items available in that category. If I choose one of those lines and click on it, I can see all of the microfilms available.

When you are looking at the list of microfilms, you will see symbols in the
right-hand column. In this example, there are camera symbols, and a camera with a key over it. The camera symbol means that the images have been digitized, and you can look at them online from your home computer. The camera with a key over it means that there is some kind of restriction on viewing the digital images. You can click on it to see what the restriction is. Sometimes the item must be viewed at a Family History Center or Affiliate Library, and sometimes the item can only be viewed with an LDS member login. Another symbol to look out for (not shown here) is the magnifying glass. That means that the records have been indexed.

![Table](This family history center has 13 of 13 films/fiche.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Collection/Shelf</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>DGS</th>
<th>Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOPEKA Declarations of intention no. 1-300 1908-1919</td>
<td>Family History Library</td>
<td>United States &amp; Canada Film</td>
<td>1711040 Items 3-5</td>
<td>7797924</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declarations of intention no. 201-649 1915-1942</td>
<td>Family History Library</td>
<td>United States &amp; Canada Film</td>
<td>1711262 Items 1-3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>United States &amp; Canada Film</td>
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<td>United States &amp; Canada Film</td>
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<td>United States &amp; Canada Film</td>
<td>1711263</td>
<td>7796817</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com" alt="link" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

c. 5. Sources for documents
   ii. Local History and Genealogy Societies
Local Historical Societies and Genealogical Societies are a fantastic and frequently overlooked resource. If there is a Historical Society in the area where your ancestor lived, you need to get in touch with them and find out what they’ve got. For example, one branch of my Volga German Family lived in Hastings, Nebraska, which is in Adams County. The Adams County Nebraska Historical Society sent me copies of my grandparents’ marriage license and the church record transcription of my gr-gr-grandmother’s burial records. The Morgan Museum (Ft. Morgan Colorado) sent me my grandparents’ obituaries and a map of where their burial plots are in the cemetery. On my French Canadian side, some of my ancestors lived in Bay City Michigan. Someone from the Bay County Michigan Genealogy Society sent me copies of my family’s obituaries and photos of their headstones from the local cemetery. Typically, a local History or Genealogy Society will have things like obituary indexes, local directories, and cemetery indexes, but they might have much more than that. You never know what a particular Society might have until you ask. Just Google the name of the county (or city) where your ancestor lived, along with the words “genealogy society” or “historical society” and see what comes up.
c. 5. Sources for documents

iii. Libraries

I love libraries. If your local public library subscribes to the Library edition of Ancestry, that’s a great way to get free access to that database. Some public libraries have separate genealogy departments, and subscribe to many different genealogy databases. Some libraries are Family History Library Affiliates, which allows you to view Family Search digital images that might be restricted to viewing at a Family History Center. The library in the location where your ancestors lived might have specific resources for that geographic area, such as newspaper indexes, local directories, and census records for the area. They might even have seminars about how to get started doing genealogy, or they might host the meetings of the local history or genealogy society. In addition to public libraries, there are libraries that specialize in materials related to Volga Germans and Germans from Russia. The Center for Volga German Studies in Portland, Oregon, and the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, in Lincoln, Nebraska, both collect materials that would be of interest to you if you are researching Volga Germans.

c. 5. Sources for documents

iv. Ancestry.com

Love Ancestry.com or Hate Ancestry.com? Sometimes it is both at the same time. It is a fantastic resource, and I use my Ancestry account constantly. So why do some people (like me) sometimes hate Ancestry.com? Two main problems: First, the record “Hints” sometimes have nothing at all to do with your ancestor. I can’t tell you how many times Ancestry has given me a “hint” to a record that clearly is an entirely different person than the one I am researching. Second, it is common for user submitted trees to contain completely incorrect information. The biggest mistake that people make when starting out in genealogy research is to assume that the information that other people put in their online trees is accurate, checked, and supported with research. If this was true, Ancestry (and MyHeritage and FamilySearch) would solve all of your genealogy research problems instantly. The fact is that you have to very carefully examine any information that you find in other people’s trees and verify everything. That said, Ancestry has an excellent collection of documents, and is one of the best sources available for genealogy research.

End of Part 1.