

Lifting the Curtain on East European Family History Research

Joseph B. Everett, AG[®], MLS, joe_everett@byu.edu

Overview: *Eastern Europe is a region that defies precise definition, and misconceptions about its people, their history, and their records abound. Yet, after all its tragic history and diverse complexity the veil is lifting. This class will shine a light on Eastern Europe and help demystify the task of tracing family history in this part of the world.*

What is Eastern Europe?

Definitions of Eastern Europe vary, but this region often refers to European countries that were behind the “Iron Curtain,” including the following:

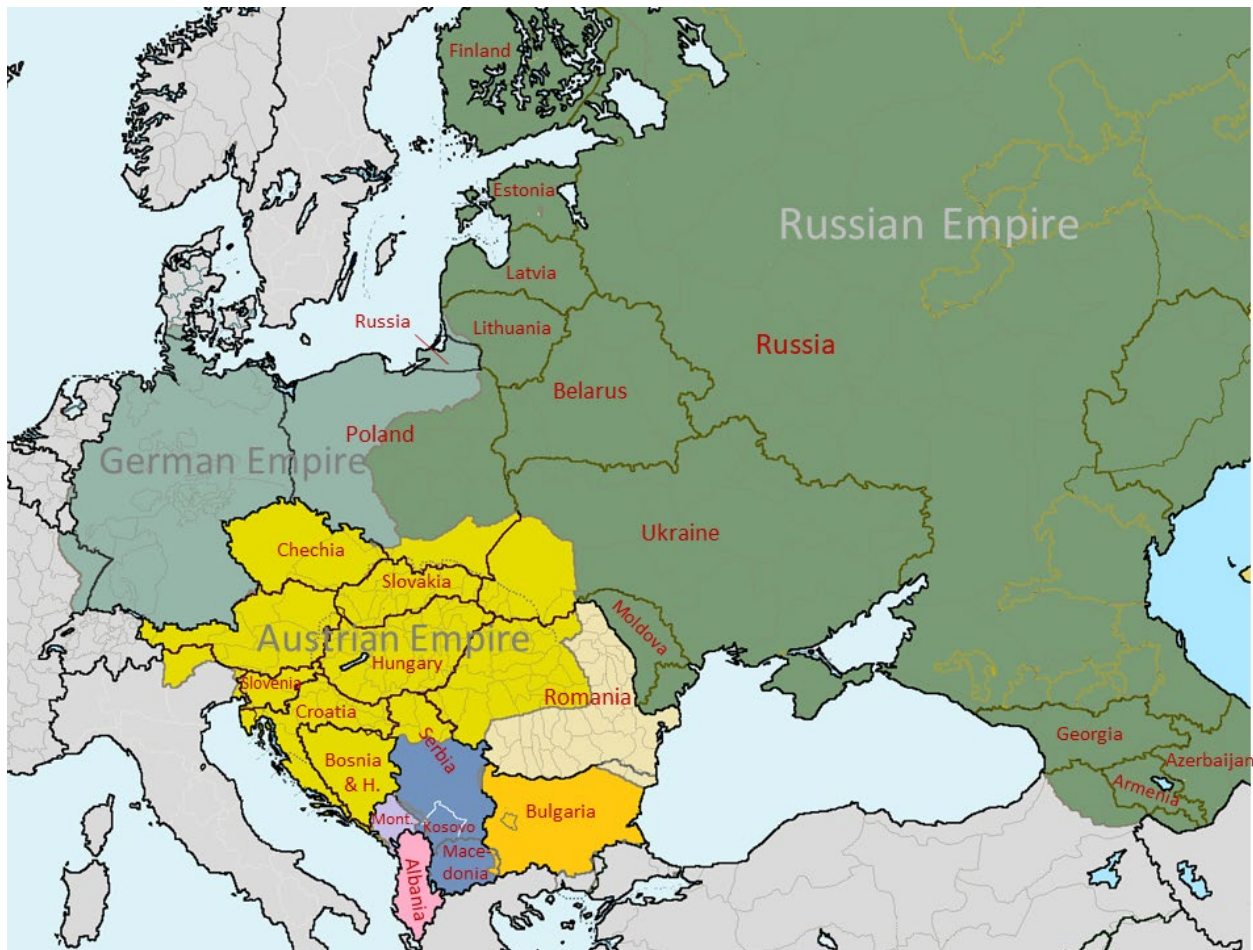
- **Former Soviet Union:** Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine
- **Former Warsaw Pact:** Albania, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia
- **Former Yugoslavia:** Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia

Other definitions of Europe place some of these countries in Central or Southern Europe, or in other regional categories. The Transcaucasian countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are technically part of the Asian continent, but are often geopolitically associated with Europe. Of course, most of Russia is in Asia as well, but it is associated with Europe because its history and population are centered there.

Largely due to the former communist influence, and the political domination of Russia, Westerners tend to assume there is a high degree of homogeneity to Eastern Europe. There is a tendency to lump everything in this region into the same category—as “Slavic,” “Cyrillic,” or even “Russian.” More than half of the Eastern European countries were never part of Russia or the USSR. And though most of the land is in Russia, which has by far the largest population, the majority of people in Eastern Europe are not Russians, and a great many are not even Slavic. The languages spoken in Eastern Europe include many non-Slavic languages, and even the Slavic languages often use a Latin script rather than Cyrillic.

The term “Russian research” is generally applied only to the countries of the former Russian Empire and USSR, yet even that is an over-simplification. There are ten Eastern European countries that were in the USSR and eleven that were wholly or partly in the Russian Empire. While records in these countries were mainly kept in Russian historically, each has distinct peoples, cultures, and languages. Other than Russians in the Russian Federation or living as minorities in other countries, the people in these countries do not identify as Russian—and never have—beyond acknowledging Russian citizenship when applicable. Even within Russia today there are over 190 different ethnic groups.

Border Changes



Eastern Europe in 1914 (Overlaid on Modern Borders). Image modified from original posted by Areat (<https://bit.ly/37Mue1n>).

When discussing this region, we often hear the vague generalization, “the borders changed back and forth a lot.” Indeed, there have been significant border changes, even some continuing today. Keeping track of all the changes can be challenging and requires consulting reference materials on historical geography to keep straight. There are a few key points in history to particularly be aware of:

- **Partitions of Poland (1772-1795)** – For centuries, Poland-Lithuania was one of the largest countries in Europe. That ended in the late 18th century as Prussia, Austria, and Russia took over all its territory in three partitions.
- **Congress of Vienna (1815)** – After Napoleon’s defeat, practically all of Eastern Europe belonged to one of four empires: Austria, Prussia, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire.
- **Treaty of Berlin (1878)** – With the victory of Russia in the Russo-Turkish War, the Ottoman Empire declined, with Albania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia emerging as independent states. (By this time, Prussia had united with the other German states to form the German Empire, in 1871.)

- **Pre-World War I (1914)** – See the above map. The German, Austrian, and Russian Empires continued to dominate Eastern Europe, with similar borders to 1815. The Ottoman Empire had declined further, losing Albania in 1912. Meanwhile, Austria had annexed Bosnia. and
- **Interwar Period (1919-1938)** – World War I changed the map of Europe, which took some time to settle after WWI due largely to the Russian Revolution and ensuing civil war. The Soviet Union was established, retaking the Baltic countries. Austria was broken up into numerous independent countries, with several forming the new country of Yugoslavia. Romania grew. And Poland reemerged as an independent country and reclaimed former lands in Belarus, Lithuania, and Ukraine.
- **Cold War (1945-1991)** – After WWII, the map of Europe changed again. Germany shrank further and was divided. The boundaries of Poland shifted west. Other smaller border adjustments were made to several countries.
- **Modern Europe (1991-Present)** – As the Cold War ended, the Soviet Union split into 15 independent countries. Germany was united in 1990, but never regained its eastern territories that had been lost to Poland, Russia, and Lithuania. Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia split, the latter devolving into further military conflict in Bosnia and Serbia, which led to further divisions. Border volatility continues today as Russia occupies Crimea and other parts of Ukraine, as well as parts of Georgia and Moldova.

Immigration from Eastern Europe

The main periods of immigration from Eastern European countries to the United States and Canada are as follows:

- 1820-1914 – Millions of immigrants came, particularly Poles and East European Jews. In the late 19th Century, other immigrants came, especially from territories of the Austrian Empire, such as many Ukrainians to Canada. Germans from Russia began settling in Canada and the U.S. around this same time.
- 1918-1938 – Many immigrants came after the upheaval of World War I and continued unrest in Eastern Europe, including the Russian Civil War and rise of the Soviet Union.
- 1941-1950s – Many refugees fled during WWII due to the war and Nazi and Communist persecutions. Those who could escape during the war did so, although many were not able to until the war ended, often several years later. Immigration effectively ceased as Communist countries tightened their borders in the 1950s-60s and restricted emigration.
- 1991-Present – A new wave of immigration from Eastern Europe has followed the end of the Cold War as open borders, uncertain futures, and the hope for a better life in the West have enticed many.

As most immigrants came in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and many of the later immigrants were still born before WWI, much of the research is focused on pre-WWI records. Thus, the map of Europe from 1914 on the prior page is generally the most important to be familiar with. Many genealogical records in archives and online are organized according to these pre-WWI boundaries.

Research in Eastern Europe - Debunking Myths

There are several myths about family history in Eastern Europe that can be stumbling blocks in your research. By learning the truths that debunk the myths, you may be able to break down your brick walls.

MYTH: *The records were destroyed.*

- Most records have been well preserved. Cases of record destruction are isolated.
- Billions of records exist in original paper format, mainly in government archives.
- Hundreds of millions are online, many scanned from FamilySearch microfilm.
- It is not so much a question of whether the records exist, but where to find them.

Table Records online on FamilySearch.

Country	Images	Country	Images
Albania	67,000	Hungary	19.8 million
Armenia	1.7 million	Lithuania	1.4 million
Belarus	1.4 million	Poland	33 million
Bulgaria	338,000	Russia	27 million
Croatia	2.5 million	Slovakia	3.4 million
Czechia	21.2 million	Slovenia	1.1 million
Estonia	5 million	Ukraine	18 million
Georgia	2.1 million	Total	138 million +

The table above shows images online from FamilySearch, totaling over 138 million images. Microfilming in Poland and Hungary started early in the Cold War and once it ended, expanded to other former Communist Bloc countries. FamilySearch has since converted these microfilms to digital. Since 2015, all new FamilySearch acquisitions have been with digital cameras, with some beginning to be captured digitally. These records are available online to all register users, except for Poland, where about 90% of images are available to view in family history centers and 10% are accessible from home.

These are impressive numbers, especially for those who lived during the Cold War and could not imagine getting any records from these countries. However, this represents only a fraction of all the records available from this region. Most record acquisition has been limited to national or state/province-level government archives. Some scanning has been done in church archives in select countries. Moreover, FamilySearch is far from acquiring records from all the national and state archives, especially in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus where microfilm halted due to political forces in the 2000s. In Ukraine, at least, acquisition has resumed as of this year, with a new FamilySearch contract. To date, FamilySearch has not acquired images in the following countries: Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Latvia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, or Serbia. However, some records microfilmed in other countries may

The major focus of microfilming and digitization, whether by FamilySearch or others has been on church and civil registers of births, marriages, and deaths. Other major record types include census and military records for some countries. There are also some significant, specialized collections for certain regions.

Russian Orthodox Marriage Record, Kirilovka, Russia, 1913. (Perm State Archives pokolenia.permkrai.ru/)

Roman Catholic baptism registers, Chelmo, Poland, 1850 (FamilySearch<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/178901>).

MYTH: *East European research is totally different than research you know.*

The Truth:

- Families in Eastern Europe have much in common with families in other places.
- The goals are the same: prove identity and relationships and tell their stories.
- While there are differences in the language, format, and accessibility of records, there are also many parallels to research elsewhere.
- Standard genealogical principles and methodologies apply.
- That said, Russian genealogy also has special challenges.

Standard Research Methods

In the essentials, East European genealogy research is like research in any other geographic area. Here are some of the standard research methods that apply:

- Start with what you know from prior evidence, including prior research, family records, memories, etc.
- Separate proven facts from unproven hypotheses.
- Set goals to systematically answer specific research questions.
- Use records in the places the ancestor was known to be:
 - To find specific evidence of their place of origin.
 - To gather context about the family. (Every detail may aid in later identifying them.)
- Once you determine the specific place of origin (or your hypothesis):
 - Determine the historical and modern record-keeping jurisdictions.
 - Determine where the original records are and how to access them.
 - Access the records, or derivatives if necessary.
 - Find and extract relevant information (evidence).
 - Analyze the evidence and make sound conclusions to answer your research questions, including proving whether the place of origin is correct.
- In all this, follow the Genealogical Proof Standard
 - Conduct an exhaustive search.
 - Cite your sources.
 - Analyze the evidence thoroughly and correlate it with other evidence.
 - Resolve conflicting evidence.
 - Write sound conclusions.

Special Challenges to East European Research

While there are standard methods, each geographic area also has its unique challenges, and East European genealogy is no exception. Some may find it more difficult than research in other areas, though that depends on your perspective.

The following special challenges have parallels with other geographic areas though the specific manifestations of these challenges in each geographic area are unique.

- Complex historical geography
- Regional variations in records
- Large gaps in records availability and indexing
- Difficult languages, fonts, and scripts
- Personal and place name problems

Complex Historical Geography

We have already reviewed some of the major border changes. Besides changes to countries, there were significant changes to internal boundaries over time, including states, provinces, and counties, as well as civil, religious, military, and other record keeping jurisdictions. Cities and towns also changed names, not only due to changes in the nationally recognized languages, but also for other reasons, such as the renaming of cities in the Soviet Union to honor Communist Party heroes.

Regional Variations in Records

To a large extent, the autocratic regimes of Empires and Communist governments created uniformity in many of the records. However, the vastness of this region, its evolution over time, and the diversity of ethno-linguistic groups it encompasses means that there are also many regional variations in the types of records that were kept, the content of the records, the language they are in.

Gaps in Records Availability and Indexing

Even with hundreds of millions of online records, this is only the tip of the iceberg, and only a fraction is indexed. Most records are still only accessible in original form in archives. There are also many records whose whereabouts are unknown. Record gaps in this region are largely due to the relatively new openness of these countries, and some have closed again due to renewed political repression. The unevenness of access is a function of various administrations across 24 different countries and regional variations in the attitudes of state and local archives. Some records may indeed be lost, while others may be hidden in archives, or in other places, their existence yet to be discovered. There is hope, as many records thought to be lost have turned up.

Due to the scarcity of indexes, the records that are online must often be searched by image browse. There is no equivalent to the national decennial censuses or other comprehensive national record sets one can use to discover an ancestor's location. In most cases, you need to know the precise place of origin first. Research in this area requires persistence and may require old-fashioned methods for accessing and searching the records.

Difficult languages, fonts, and scripts

The original records in this region are of course not in English. They may not even be in the same language as the modern country but could be in multiple other languages used historically. They may be in a Cyrillic alphabet. Even when the script is Latin records are not easy to read as most are handwritten and that can vary widely. But you can learn to do it without becoming fluent. More on this later.

Personal and Place Names

There are a variety of issues with personal and place names. This is true for any research, but especially for East Europe. Here are some common issues.

Place Imprecision

Ancestors were not always exact about the place they were from. Here are some scenarios:

- Specific places were not always required on forms.
- Even when required, they sometimes named a larger town or region.
- The last residence may be given rather than a birthplace.

- They may not have correctly remembered the exact place.
- The place may be a small village or farm, while the records are in a nearby place.
- There may be many places by the same or similar names.
- The name of the place and the historical jurisdictions may have changed over time.

Place and Personal Name Variation

There may be dozens of possible spelling variants for each personal and place name. Here are some main reasons for such variation.

- Ancestors (not immigration officials) changed their names for various reasons, inconsistently.
- Attempts to translate the name into the new language.
- Attempts to write the name the way it sounds.
- Changes to political boundaries, official languages, and local dialect variations.
- Mishearing the name. (Maybe 2nd or 3rd hand.)
- Nicknames and abbreviations.
- Transcription errors.

Tips for Resolving Research Problems

Here are some tips for overcoming these problems in East European research.

- Gather all possible clues and context. (Conduct an exhaustive search.)
- Identify as many variant spellings names as possible.
- Don't rely on derivatives—analyze the originals!
- Use advanced search techniques.
- Think phonetically and visually.
- Use reference tools—to their full capacity.
- Deepen knowledge of the history and geography.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Stopping at online and indexed records, ignoring other available records.
- Searching only for “correct” or “standard” spellings.
- Searching for the one record that gives the answer.
- Tunnel vision on the ancestor.
- Overlooking details.
- Making assumptions and hasty conclusions (based on bias)

MYTH: *I could never learn the language enough to find and read the records.*

The Truth:

- Yes, you can!
- You do not need to become fluent.
- You can study the alphabet, basic vocabulary, and common record formats.
- You can use language reference aids, such as alphabet guides and word lists. (Crutches are a good thing!)
- You can use paleography techniques: learn common record formats, trace and compare characters, and examining the full context of the document.
- You can get help from other genealogists with experience in this area, native or fluent speakers, or professional or volunteer translators.

You might take some comfort in the fact that even native speakers struggle with research without some knowledge of paleography, terminology, and of course methodology. There are many people who can hardly pronounce an intelligible word in another language, but who can trace their lineage much better than the average native.

Help is Available

There are many opportunities to find help with your research in Eastern Europe:

- Genealogical societies offer conferences, webinars, other learning events, online information, and a community of people to help.
- Researchers have published how-to guide books and print and electronic articles
- The FamilySearch Research wiki and other websites provide information records, methods, with links to resources.
- The Family History Library and family history centers offer in-person and virtual help.
- Social media and other online communities can offer research advice and give transcription and translation help.

Resources

Historical Geography

- **Euroatlas-Nüssli.** “History of Europe.” *Euratlas.com*
<https://www.euratlas.net/history/europe/index.html>
- **GenTeam** (<https://GenTeam.at>) – Free site including a gazetteer of the former Austrian Empire. Also includes indexes and reference information about researching in this region.
- **Kartenmeister**, <http://www.kartenmeister.com/preview/databaseuwe.asp> - Online gazetteer of the areas of Germany now in Poland, Russia, or Lithuania. Includes the German and modern names and location of parishes and civil registration.
- Magocsi, Paul Robert. *Historical Atlas of Central Europe*, 3rd rev ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).
- **Mapire**, <https://mapire.eu> – Detailed historic maps of 19th century Europe overlaid over a modern map. Includes nearly the full German Empire as well as most of the rest of Europe.
- **Topographic Maps of Eastern Europe: At Atlas of the Shtetl** (<https://easteurotopo.org/>)
Designed for Jewish research, but applies to any research in Eastern Europe. It includes hundreds of historic maps, including map sets with great detail.
- **FamilySearch Places** (<https://www.familysearch.org/research/places/>)
A worldwide gazetteer produced by FamilySearch using their place authority database. You can use it to search for places, including some variant spellings of those places. When you select a place in the search results, you get a close up map, the latitude and longitude, and some other information. Especially helpful is the list of alternate names for the place.
- **JewishGen Communities Database** (<https://www.jewishgen.org/Communities>) An online gazetteer not only useful for researchers looking for Jewish ancestors, but for East European research in general.

Significant Websites for East European Research in General

- **FamilySearch** (www.familysearch.org) –Includes millions of online records from Eastern Europe as well as other research helps. Nearly all of the FamilySearch microfilms have been digitized and are browseable in Historical Records or in the Catalog. Some include indexes. Also includes the Research Wiki with helpful information on how to do genealogy by country, descriptions of records, word lists, and links to online records.
- **JewishGen** (www.jewishgen.org) – Major web site for Jewish research. Includes hundreds of index databases extracted from East European records, links to online images, as well as many research helps.
- **Ancestry.com** (www.ancestry.com) – Includes online records for tracing North American immigrant origins and a growing collection of Eastern European records, most of which have been acquired through partnerships with FamilySearch, JewishGen, and others.
- **Federation of East European Family History Societies (FEEFHS)** (www.feeffhs.org) – East European interest group with informative articles, maps, and other resources for East European Research. Holds a workshop each summer in Salt Lake City.
- **East European Genealogical Society** (<http://eegsociety.org/Home.aspx>) – Another society focused on Russian and other East European family history research.

Significant Web Sites by Country

This is by no means a comprehensive list of websites for Eastern Europe with online records. In addition to checking the sites listed here by country, be aware that records for a country may be found on a website from another country, due to historical boundary changes. Not all countries are represented, as not all have their own websites with significant record collections. In addition to these sites, be sure to check FamilySearch and the FamilySearch Wiki for other online records for each country.

Belarus

See also FamilySearch and also sources for Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, which include Belarus records.

- **Archives of Belarus** (<http://archives.gov.by/eng>) Portal page for the national and regional archives of Belarus. Includes good English-language resource listings for genealogists. No online record collections so far, but there is information about where to find the records in the archive. (FamilySearch has online records for Belarus.)

Czech Republic

- **Czechia Online Records** (https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Czechia_Online_Genealogy_Records) FamilySearch page with links to various records, including the Czech regional archives sites with church records. This is the best place to start, as it provides links as well as information on how to access the records on these sites.

Estonia

- **Estonian Historical Archives - Saaga** (<http://www.ra.ee/dgs/>) – Includes digital images of church records, Jewish records, censuses (revision lists), and many other types of records of

Estonia dating back to the Russian Empire period. Some pages available in English, otherwise Estonian. Records are mostly in Russian or German. Free registration is required.

Hungary

- **Parish registers of the Hungarian Evangelical (Lutheran) Church** (<http://www.oskereso.hu>) Hungarian Evangelical Lutheran church site with access to digital images of church records from across Hungary. The site charges a nominal subscription fee for access.
- **Kalocsa-Keckskemét Archdiocesan Archives** (<https://archivum.asztrik.hu/>) Includes online Catholic church books from the former Bács-Bodrog county, currently in southern Hungary and northern Serbia, available for a fee.

Latvia

- **Latvian State Historical Archive - Raduraksti** (www.lvva-raduraksti.lv/en.html) - Over 5 million images (no indexes) in its Raduraksti (lineage) database, including Russian Empire era church records, Jewish records, and censuses. Free registration is required. (Also includes some records from Belarus.) Site is also in English. Records are mostly in Russian, German, or Latvian.

Lithuania

See also Polish and Russian sites which include some records for Lithuania.

- **Virtual Electronic Heritage System - ePaveldas** (www.epaveldas.lt/en/home) – Includes Roman Catholic church records from the 1500s-1900s as well as other manuscript collections, digital books, newspapers, etc. Part of site is in English, but to get to the collections, you need to switch to Lithuanian. Records may be in Russian, Polish, German, Belarusian or Lithuanian. (Also includes some records for Belarus.)
- **GenMetrika** (<http://www.genmetrika.eu/>) – Includes online Catholic Church register books.
- **Pasvalia** (<http://www.pasvalia.lt/>) – Roman Catholic church records online for the Pasvalys region.

Poland

- **Szukaj w Archiwach** (www.szukajwarchiwach.pl) - The Poland State Archives has published 2.3 million images so far from hundreds of parishes in 40 archives. (Also includes records from former Polish areas now in Belarus, Lithuania, and Ukraine).
- **Polish Indexes: Geneteka** (<http://geneteka.genealodzy.pl>) - A service of the Polish Genealogical Society, this site includes index data for parishes throughout Poland, including areas that were formerly part of Poland prior to World War II. (Also includes records from former Polish areas now in Belarus, Lithuania, and Ukraine).
- **Jewish Records Indexing-Poland** (www.jewishgen.org/jri-pl/index.htm) - JRI-Poland has indexed over 5 million Jewish vital records from 550+ Polish towns using FamilySearch microfilms and original records in Poland. Search on Jewishgen.org, some also on Ancestry.com.
- **Polish Genealogical Society of America (PGSA)** (www.pgsa.org/) - Active society with a web site, publications, educational events, and other resources to help Polish-Americans find their roots.

Russia

- **Russia Archive Portal** (www.rusarchives.ru) – Portal site for all Russian archives. Includes contact info and links to individual archive sites, information about holdings, and some finding aids. No online record collections so far. All in Russian.
- **Metrics.tilda.ws** (Metrical Books Portal Site) (<https://Metrics.tilda.ws>)
A portal for finding metrical books in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, focused on Russian Orthodox records. Includes links to information about archival holdings of metrical books and, where available, links to online collections of metrical books. Includes reference online copies of reference aids, including parish directories and gazetteers. Also includes a catalog of where to find 1897 Census records.
- **Polonia Permskovo Kraya (Generations of the Perm Region)** (pokolenia.permkrai.ru/) 1.7 million+ records (images and index) from Orthodox parishes in the Perm region, provided by the government of the Perm Region. Site is in Russian only site. Click Поиск to start a search.
- **Pamyat' Naroda (Memory of the People)** 1941-1945 (<https://pamyat-naroda.ru/>) – Index and digital images for millions of military records for World War II. Includes records soldiers who died, went missing in action, received awards, etc. Also includes records for soldiers from Belarus, Ukraine, and other former Soviet countries. Site is in Russian and English.
- **Victims of Political Terror in the USSR** (base.memo.ru) - Database of more than 2.6 million victims of political terror in the Soviet Union. In Russian.
- **Arkhivy Sankt-Peterburg (Archives of St. Petersburg)** (<https://spbarchives.ru/>) Portal for the archives of St. Petersburg, including the city and oblast. These include birth, marriage, and death records from metrical books from Russian Empire period and Soviet-era civil registration records, as well as historical photographs and more. Online access is available for a fee, though free access has been provided during the pandemic.
- **1941-1945 Pobediteli** (Victors) (<https://www.pobediteli.ru/>) – Database of more than 1 million surviving Russian veterans of the Great War.
- **Skorbim.com** (<http://skorbim.com>) – Russian site similar to Find a Grave, with an index to over 1.7 million headstone from over 33,000 cemeteries.

Ukraine

See also resources for Russia.

- **Archives of Ukraine** (<http://www.archives.gov.ua/Eng/>) – Official web-portal of the state archival service of Ukraine. Includes links to specific archives and information about holdings. No online collections of genealogical interest yet. Much of the site is available in English.
- **Arkhivy (Archives)** on *Wikisource* (Ukrainian) (<https://uk.wikisource.org/wiki/Аpxивн>)
Scanned records from Ukrainian Archives as part of an ongoing project organized by Alex Krakovsky, a private citizen and genealogist. Organized by archive and then by fond (record group), opis (inventory), and delo (file). Includes many different types of records including metrical books, 1897 Census, revision lists, other population lists, etc. The main focus is on Jewish records, but records of other religious groups are also being scanned. The site is in Ukrainian, but you can navigate by using Google translate.