



Germany Civil Registration

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WHAT IS CIVIL REGISTRATION?

Civil registration is governmental registration of all births, marriages and deaths that occurred in a specific district. Civil registration districts (**Zivilstandsamt** until 1874, and **Standesamt** 1874 to present) were strictly organized geographically. All individuals were registered regardless of religious faith. The system is still in use today.

There were usually two copies produced, particularly after 1874. The **Hauptregister** or primary copy was generally kept in the local civil registrar office, while the duplicate copy or **Nebenregister** was to be collected centrally at the court level for safekeeping. Many of these duplicate records are now located in state archives.

Depending on the area and time period, civil registration may be recorded in German, French, Danish, or Polish.

Due to privacy laws, access to recent records is restricted to immediate family members. These restrictions are as follows:

Germany

Births: 110 years

Marriages: 80 years

Deaths: 30 years

Poland

Births: 100 years

Marriages: 80 years

Deaths: 80 years

WHEN DID CIVIL REGISTRATION OCCUR?

There were three forms of civil registration, organized by German state:

Church register duplicates were secondary copies of church registers made for government officials. They began in most areas in the late 1700s to early 1800s. They are typically organized by religion, then by year and record type. They usually look similar or identical to the church records.

Napoleonic civil registration was established in France in the 1790s. This form of civil registration expanded in German territory for the following time periods:

- 1798: all territories west of the Rhine River were annexed and civil registration commenced
- 1808: Kingdom of Westphalia, ruled by Napoleon's brother, instituted civil registration
- 1808-1810: Grand Duchy of Berg, a French client state, instituted civil registration
- 1811: northwestern German was fully annexed and civil registration commenced

In most areas, civil registration ended between 1811 and 1815 after the French were defeated.

Most Napoleonic civil registration records were handwritten in paragraph form, with some printed forms appearing later. These were written in formulaic legalese; for French empire areas, the records were kept in French, and the French Republican calendar was in use through 1805. For more information on the French Republican calendar, see the FamilySearch Wiki page https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/French_Republican_Calendar. For help in converting dates, use the website <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/the-republican-calendar/>.

Modern civil registration was established in different parts of Germany at different times. Some areas, mostly west of the Rhine River, continued Napoleonic civil registration. In general, independent cities started earliest. The following dates mark the beginning of modern civil registration:

- 1798: areas west of the Rhine River
- 1811: Lübeck, Bremen
- 1851: Frankfurt am Main
- 1866: Hamburg
- October 1874: Prussia
- 1 January 1876: German Empire

Only in 1876 with empire-wide civil registration were the forms pre-printed and uniform.

Birth records generally contain the registration date (not necessarily the birth date), the name of the informant, the name of the mother and father, residence of the mother, the birthdate of the child, and the full name of the child.

Marriage records generally contain information about the groom and bride, including name, birthdate and place, residence, occupation, and parents' names, residences, and occupations. Additionally, marriage records contain the names, occupations, ages, and residences of the witnesses. Some early marriage records may list grandparents' names, any children being legitimized by the marriage, and relationships between the witnesses and the marital couple.

Death records contain the registration date (not necessarily the death date), the name and residence of the informant, the name, age, and residence of the deceased, the deceased's birthplace, the names of the spouse and parents of the deceased, and the date and time of death.

Civil registration records often contain **margin notes**. These notes may refer to a subsequent marriage, divorce, death, or legitimization.

WHERE ARE CIVIL REGISTRATION RECORDS ONLINE?

Many civil registration records are available online from three major websites:

- **Ancestry** (www.ancestry.com): these records are indexed, though not every name is indexed, and sometimes given or maiden names are not indexed. They are organized by archive rather than by civil registration district and are usually available through the 1920s or 1930s.
- **FamilySearch** (www.familysearch.org): these records are organized in the FamilySearch Catalog by civil registration district. While relatively few records are indexed, most are available as online images, and in some cases death records are available through the 1980s. For help with searching through the image collections on FamilySearch, see the

“How to” Guide Accessing FamilySearch Digital Images, found at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/FamilySearch_%22How_to%22_Guides.

- **Pradziad / Szukaj w archiwach:** these records apply only for areas currently in Poland. **Pradziad** (<http://baza.archiwa.gov.pl/sezam/pradziad.php?l=en>) lists all civil registration records held by the state archives, while **Szukaj w archiwach** (www.szukajwarchiwach.pl) houses any records which have been digitized. There is no consistency in dates or locations. Indexing efforts for these records are found at other websites.

WHERE ARE CIVIL REGISTRATION RECORDS IN GERMANY?

To locate a **Standesamt** (civil registration office) in Germany, follow these steps:

1. Identify the original civil registration district. Civil registration districts may have changed. In most cases, districts were merged and enlarged into fewer offices. For the original civil registration district, use the website www.meyersgaz.org. For help using this website, use the Meyer’s Online “Howto” Guide found on the FamilySearch Wiki at: https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Germany_%22How_to%22_Guides
2. Identify the current civil registration district. Civil registration districts are organized by **Stadt** (city), **Gemeinde** (community), or **Verbandsgemeinde** – abbreviated **VG** (municipality). To find this jurisdiction, do a Google search for the original civil registration district. Then find the Wikipedia page to identify the jurisdiction.
3. Search for the **Standesamt** website. Google the name of the current district along with the word *Standesamt*. The first few hits may be ads for document service companies. Look for a website that contains the name of the town, followed immediately by the ending “.de” (Example: www.berlin.de).
4. Identify the contact information. Every **Standesamt** should have an email address. Look for the word **Kontakt** or **Impressum**.
5. Write your email in German. If you are not fluent, use the German letter writing guide, found at: https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/German_Letter_Writing_Guide. Here you can identify sentences in English, and copy and paste the corresponding German sentences in your email. If your specific request does not fit one of the sentences, Google Translate, found at <https://translate.google.com/>, is a less-accurate way to create your letter. Be aware that it may not translate the meaning you intend. When you receive your answer, use Google Translate to read the response in English.