Using Historic Newspapers to Learn More About Your German Ancestor

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Historic newspapers can be a boon for family historians. They may include notices of births, marriages, or deaths, property sales, inventions, business licenses requested, intentions to emigrate, and more. Your ancestor may be mentioned in a news article. Historical information, such as local events, grocery prices, and advertisements can help you understand your ancestor's world and add color to your family history.

INTRODUCTION

Newspapers were not intended to be historical documents, rather, to be read and discarded quickly. Only a relatively small percentage have surviving copies, often on microfilm. Since microfilm is fast becoming obsolete, efforts to preserve these copies through digitization have increased in recent years. Even as digital copies they may only be available in a local archive or library, but the search may well be worth the effort.

It is important to understand topics like the difference between "picture-only" and searchable images, and effective search strategies (search not only by name!). Numerous helpful articles about searching newspapers and links to online newspaper collections are found online.

Some U.S. German-language newspapers had regular columns of news from the "old country", sometimes arranged by German state. During WWI, some papers also published the weekly casualty lists of German soldiers. On fully searchable websites, it may be helpful to search for the German hometown in addition to names and events.

ETHNIC AND GERMAN-LANGUAGE NEWSPAPERS IN THE UNITED STATES

Printed research guides and bibliographies

The book by Ernest Thode "*Historic German Newspapers Online*", now in its second edition, lists links to approximately 2,000 German-language newspapers available online.

"*The Family Tree Historical Newspapers Guide- How to find your ancestors in archived newspapers*" by James M. Beidler, published in 2018 by Family Tree Books.

"Finding Your Ancestors in Historical Newspapers: A Practical Guide to Improving Your Online Newspaper Research Results" by Kenneth R. Marks, published in 2024.

Subscription collections include:
- Newspaperarchives.com
- Genealogybank.com
- Newspapers.com, and more.

Public and academic libraries may have subscriptions that can be accessed without charge, on site and/ or online.

Purdue University guide

Free historic U.S. newspapers arranged by region, then state: https://guides.lib.purdue.edu/digitalUSnewspapers

Advantage Archives

A list of digitized newspapers from various community institutions, arranged by state, town or county, and institution, is found at https://theancestorhunt.com/blog/100-million-historic-u-s-newspaper-pages-now-available-from-dvantage-archives/ . The images are searchable by institution. This list provides easier access to the collections than going directly to the Advantage Archives website.

Chronicling America

The largest free collection of historic newspapers is found at http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/. The site also includes a U.S. Newspaper Directory, 1690-Present at http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/.

The "Advanced search" options allows searches by state, county, or town, name of a specific newspaper. Other search terms include ethnicity, language, and specific time periods.
Example:
A search for German newspapers published in German in Iowa brings up 33 titles with the publication places and dates. Many newspapers were only published for a few years. The full entry also includes other details: intended audience, alternate titles, political editorial line etc., and which libraries have copies. Two of these publications can be accessed on the Chronicling America website. Nationwide, twenty-eight German-language newspapers are available on this site.

State collections

Many state libraries and universities also offer online digitized newspaper collections, for example:
- Missouri, see https://shsmo.org/collections/newspapers/mdnp

- Illinois, see https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/. The papers are searchable.
- Indiana, see https://newspapers.library.in.gov/
- Colorado, see https://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org/
- California, see https://cdnc.ucr.edu/
- Minnesota, see https://www.mnhs.org/newspapers
- Wisconsin, see https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/WisconsinNewspapers

Some historical background and links to pages describing German-language newspapers in various states are found in this Wikipedia article: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_language_newspapers_in_the_United_States.

GERMAN-LANGUAGE NEWSPAPERS IN EUROPE

Translation help
The Deepl translator (https://www.deepl.com/translator) and GoogleTranslate (https://translate.google.com/) are useful in navigating foreign-language websites. Choose the "from" and "to" languages and "copy and paste" the Web address or a text segment into the box to be translated.

Newspapers go by many names!
The standard term for a newspaper is "Zeitung", but other terms are often used in the name that may allude to the publication's primary purpose, frequency, or intended audience. Examples:
- *Abendblatt* (evening newspaper)
- *Amtsblatt/Amtsblätter* (official newspaper/s)
- *Polizeiblatt/Polizeiblätter* (police newspaper/s)
- *Intelligenzblatt/ Inteligenzblätter* (intelligence paper/s – „intelligence" = „news")
- *Gesetzblatt/ Gesetzblätter* (law paper/s, publish government information)
- *Kurier/ Amtskurier* (Courier- disseminate information)
- *Rundschau* (newsy, often includes entertainment sections)
- *Presse* (publication)
- *Tages-, Wochenblatt* (daily-/ weekly publication)
- *Anzeiger* (literally: notices)
- *Beilage* – (supplement)

SEARCHING NEWSPAPERS BY HAND

Newspapers are often laid out in specific sections that follow a predictable order. For instance, a government paper may publish official notices first, followed by regional and local news and then advertisements. Notices of births, marriages, and deaths may be included in the local news or even among the advertisements. Page numbers may not be consistent, but the order of the sections is. Once you have figured out where the desired information is included, you can go straight to that section of the paper to look for it.

DIGITIZED GOVERNMENT NEWSPAPERS

Government newspapers list all kinds of official business, along with the names of the parties involved. They may include names of young men who failed to show up for muster, legal and illegal emigrants, probate notices, and more. The WikiSource pages for many German states include links to digitized government newspapers.

- The link list titled "*Amtsblätter der preussischen Bezirksregierungen*" (Official papers of the Prussian regional governments) https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Amtsbl%C3%A4tter_der_preu%C3%9Fischen_Bezirksregierungen includes links to various 19th Century online editions of official papers from most regional capital cities. The lists keep on growing, and better search engines yield many a fortuitous find. These types of papers often include lists of people intending to emigrate and of young men who did not appear for muster.

- The link list titled "Gesetzblätter" (law newspapers) https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Gesetzbl%C3%A4tter#Preu.C3.9Fen provides a link list of digitized papers listing the published laws, decrees, ordinances etc. These can provide helpful background information for a family history. It is very interesting to learn about local "Ordnungen", which may include rather detailed directives on which types of fabrics are permitted as clothing for each social class, rules about weddings and other celebrations or gatherings (how many guests, appropriate foods etc.), requirements for inheritances, gaining personal freedom (manumission) etc.

- For links to lists of digitized newspapers, see the lists provided in the German WikiSource article *"Zeitung"* (newspaper) at http://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Zeitungen#Listen_digitalisierter_Zeitungen_.28WS.29 and the associated web links near the bottom of the article.
- The genealogical link collection published quarterly under "Forschungshilfen [research helps] by the genealogical society Roland zu Dortmund includes links to historic newspapers and magazines under various headings: Intelligenzblätter, Amtsblätter,

"Zeitschriften, Briefe, Nachlässe, Tagebücher, Autografen". See
https://tng.rolandgen.de/showmedia.php?mediaID=1160

USING SEARCH ENGINES

Search engines like google.de can be used to find out which newspapers existed for a given town and time period. For instance, a search for "Zeitung Görlitz 1825" brought up references to two newspapers available online, the "Görlitzer Anzeiger" and the "Oberlausitzische Fama". The Anzeiger was more of an official paper, while the other also included entertainment and short news items.

Examples of NEWSPAPER COLLECTIONS

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_online_newspaper_archives – International list of online newspaper archives by country
- https://wiki.genealogy.net/Digitale_historische_Tageszeitungen - GenWiki article about newspapers with links
- https://eudocs.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Historic_German_Newspapers_Online Another list of German historical newspapers by town of publication, with links
- https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/newspaper - newspaper portal of the German Digital Library
- https://digital.blb-karlsruhe.de/zeitungen/nav/index/all Baden historical newspapers; search field on top of the page
- https://digipress.digitale-sammlungen.de/ - Collection of Bavarian newspapers online.
- http://digital.ub.uni-duesseldorf.de/ Digital collections of the Düsseldorf State University Library. Change the language to German (flag top right) and write "Zeitung" in the search field. Results also include related publications, such as magazines and address books.
- http://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/cm/nav/index/title/ - digitized newspapers and magazines for Jewish readers from different countries; mostly in German, but also some other languages
- https://sachsen.digital/sammlungen/historische-zeitungen - Saxony historical newspapers
- http://www.agoff.de/?p=84741 - Kreis Königsberg/Neumark compiled notices of births, marriages, deaths from various newspapers
- https://zeitpunkt.nrw/ - portal for historical newspapers from North Rhine Westphalia
- https://digital.lb-oldenburg.de/lbolrz/nav/index/all - newspapers from the former Duchy of Oldenburg. Enter search term in the field on the very top
- http://anno.onb.ac.at/ - Digitized newspapers for parts of the Austrian Empire in the digital reading room of the National Library of Austria. The collection is fully searchable.

- https://www.e-newspaperarchives.ch/?l=de – Collection of Swiss digitized historical newspapers
- https://www.digibern.ch/ueberblick/medien?tid=27&page=1 Culturre and history of Bern, Switzerland online. Choose the media type "Zeitungen".

MAGAZINES

Magazines were often a mix of local and regional news items, short stories, poetry, and some scientific, historical, and politically-colored articles. Even early-on the last volume of the year often included an index (including names) to the main articles. These publications can be a good source for short marriage-, death-, or funeral notices and occasionally longer biographies of prominent individuals, including, but not limited to: land owners, local leaders, teachers, and pastors. Links to series of digitized magazines may be found in WikiSource. Example: The "Neues Lausitzisches Magazin", see https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Neues_Lausitzisches_Magazin is available online from 1768 to 1912 with only a few issues missing. The many mentions of family events, moves, work histories etc. help mitigate the significant loss of church records in this region after World War II.

CONCLUSION

Newspapers can provide historical background and sometimes some very interesting details about an ancestor's life. Many are already available online. **They are worth exploring!**