

Introduction

Census Records and the American Family History Researcher

One of the principal record types used by family history researchers in the United States has long been the federal census. Mandated by the Constitution, enumerations have taken place in all states and territories since 1790. With the zero year as the standard date of enumeration, the procedures and record formats for a given census year were used uniformly everywhere. With the exception of the loss of the 1890 records in a tragic 1921 fire, the collection of original pages is virtually complete.

The federal census can be accessed with ease via microfilm and at several internet sites, such that researchers can easily find and study original pages. Indexes produced by individuals, societies, and commercial enterprises enable readers a quick look at ancestral candidates. The quality of those indexes is of course dependent upon the skills of indexers and extractors, but savvy users are aware of such restrictions. The fact that census pages represent a combination of primary and secondary records needs to be considered, but this aspect does not diminish the importance of federal census records as documents supporting the longitudinal study of a particular family. The most recent federal census available to the public was conducted in 1940.

Officially, the federal census was to be conducted for two purposes: the apportionment of seats in the House of Representatives and direct taxation (a practice since discontinued). The content of a standard census page increased every ten years until 2000, but was simplified in 2010. Although some residents may have been offended by the questions asked by enumerators over the years, modern researchers are grateful for the detail and hope it is complete and correct.

Additional census records have been compiled by states and territories, some at unpredictable intervals, but even those years can be determined by a study of reliable websites state by state. Some state census records offer even more exact details than the national enumerations regarding birth dates and places. Those records too are usually available for study in microform and with increasing frequency in websites.¹

German Census Records and Family History Research

Both novice family history researchers and experts who have seen census records in the United States often inquire about similar records in Germany. It would be easy to assume that every country in areas such as Europe not only made but maintains and even shares such records. Inquiries about German census records traditionally elicit such responses from experts as these: "We know that census records exist for the grand duchies of Mecklenburg-Schwerin and Schleswig-Holstein, but we don't know about other German provinces. They probably conducted censuses as well, but we can't tell you when or how or if such records still exist." One of the most experienced genealogical researchers in Germany, Eike Pies, made this observation in 2015: "I've been doing genealogical and family history research for more than fifty years and have never seen a [German] census record."²

The potential value of German census records to genealogists is substantial. Indeed, in areas where church records have been lost or before civil records were instituted in 1876, surviving census records will almost always be the only source of genealogical data on the common man. Where other primary documents exist, census records can serve to confirm what is already known.³

If in fact census records produced in the United States (and several other nations) are so important to researchers, it behooves us to determine the status of such records in historic German lands. It is beyond question that German states are the home to some of the finest church records compiled since the early sixteenth century and excellent civil records since the end of the eighteenth century. Would such a culture not also compile records of residents, mandated for whatever purposes, by governmental units? The most recent German publication on the topic was written by Rolf Gehrman in 2009 and offered this comment: "The history of [German] census records has not yet been written."⁴

The Goals of This Study

It is time for the condition described by Gehrman to be addressed. If it is to be done correctly, the following questions should be treated:

1. In which German states were censuses conducted?
2. When were the censuses conducted?
3. For what purposes were the censuses conducted?
4. What content did each census include?
5. Do original census sheets exist?
6. Where are original census records stored?
7. Have original census records been copied (micro-filmed or digitized)?
8. How can researchers gain access to existing census records?

Before the establishment of the German Empire (sometimes called the Second Empire) in 1871, the term "Germany" referred to many independent states (called in turn kingdoms, grand duchies, duchies, principalities, provinces, or free cities). Each state was free to collect records about its citizenry by whatever schedule or manner desired. Fortunately, as will be discussed below, the compilation of census data following the Napoleonic Wars was not totally arbitrary. Important trends in census methods and content have been identified and can be presented as answers to all of the above questions.

However, despite the fact that a united Germany existed from 1871 until 1918 (the end of the First World War), the traditional (and in some cases intensely individual) identity of each of the Empire's thirty-eight states is reflected in the censuses conducted there. In general, the nature of German census records is vastly different from records compiled in the United States under the same title.

Notes

- ¹ The Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah has probably the largest collection of state census records. Its catalog is available for study at www.familysearch.org.
- ² Eike Pies interview with Roger P. Minert on August 12, 2015 in Wuppertal, Germany.
- ³ Civil records (government vital records) were instituted in the areas under French military occupation from 1798 to 1815. Prussia introduced civil registration on October 1, 1874 and the same system was mandated for all of the German Empire beginning on January 1, 1876.
- ⁴ Rolf Gehrman, "German Census-Taking Before 1871." (Rostock, Germany: Max-Planck-Institut für demografische Forschung, 2009), 4.