Basic Genealogical Sources in Westphalia – An Introduction

Online Westphalia Connection Session, Dec. 5th, 2020, Roland Linde

Dear genealogists, I would like to give you some advice how you can obtain further information about your ancestors in Westphalia. But I can only give you a very few initial clues because its a fairly broad topic. Perhaps I can tell you more about the history of Westphalia in another conference; it is a diverse landscape with strong cultural, economic and religious differences.

Around 1800 Westphalia still consisted of **various clerical and secular principalities**, larger and smaller, some of which were Catholic and some were Protestant. Then the French came under Emperor Napoleon and turned Westphalia pretty much on its head. **With the Congress of Vienna** in **1815**, Westphalia first emerged as a state unit, as a **province of the Kingdom of Prussia**. Münster became the provincial capital. In **1816**, Prussia set up three **administrative districts** (*Regierungsbezirke*) within this province: **Münster** (western Westphalia), **Arnsberg** (southern Westphalia) and **Minden** (eastern Westphalia). The administrative districts were again divided into **districts** (*Kreise*) and these into rural and urban communities (*Gemeinden und Städte*).

That doesn't sound terribly exciting, but as a genealogist you have to know that in order to find the sources. The Prussians founded a **state archive in Münster**, in which the historical tradition for the whole of Westphalia was brought together. It still exists today under a different name.

Exactly 150 years later, in **1946**, the Allied occupying powers smashed the Free State of Prussia, which had dominated Germany since 1815. From the two western provinces of Prussia, the Rhineland and Westphalia, today's state of **North Rhine-Westphalia** (*Nordrhein-Westfalen*) emerged under the British military government at that time. In 1947 the former Principality of Lippe was added. The Minden district government has now been relocated to Detmold, the old capital of Lippe, and the **Detmold administrative district** (*Regierungsbezirk Detmold*) was created, today mostly known as Ostwestfalen-Lippe.

Another **state archive** has now been founded in **Detmold**, which has become responsible for the transmission of the former **administrative district of Minden** and the **former principality of Lippe**. It also became a **civil status archive** (*Personenstandsarchiv*) for the whole of **Westphalia-Lippe**, **including** the administrative districts of **Arnsberg** and **Münster**, for which the Landesarchiv Münster is otherwise responsible. That is why the state archive in Detmold is particularly important for family research.

Today the **two former state archives** are called:

- State Archives North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) Department East Westphalia-Lippe (OWL), in Detmold (*Landesarchiv NRW Abteilung OWL*)

- State Archives North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) Department Westphalia (W), in Münster (*Landesarchiv NRW AbteilungWestfalen*)

This is impractical even for native speakers, which is why the old terms „Staatsarchiv Münster" and „Staatsarchiv Detmold" are still used today.

The **recording of births, marriages and deaths** in the Prussian Province of Westphalia was initially assigned to the **Catholic and Protestant pastors**. They have kept **church records** (*Kirchenbücher*) since the 17th century. Since 1815 they made copies of their church records every year and sent them to the respective district government. This is how the **duplicates of the Westphalian church records 1815-1874** *(Kirchenbuchduplikate)*, which are now in the **state archive in Detmold**, were created. So-called „**Jewish and Dissident Registers"** (*Juden- und Dissidentenregister*) were kept for members of the Jewish minority and smaller Christian communities. Most of these registers are also located in Detmold and are already **available online**. They are currently being developed through the **crowdsourcing project JuWeL** (juwel.genealogy.net).

In the 1870s there was a serious conflict between the Kingdom of Prussia and the Catholic Church, known as the „*Kulturkampf*". For this reason, **civil registry offices** (*Standesämter*) were set up at community level in 1874, and have since officially recorded births, marriages and deaths regardless of denomination. These so-called **civil status registers** (*Personenstandsregister*) are also available in two traditions. The **first writings** are still at the respective *Standesamt* of the municipality or have been handed over to the respective **municipality archive or city archive** (*Gemeindearchiv oder Stadtarchiv*). The **central second transmission** is in turn at the **State Archives in Detmold**. The state archive has started to put the **death registers online** for the whole of Westphalia-Lippe from **1874 to 1938**.

In Germany, **data protection laws** are very strict. This also has an impact on family history. The **civil birth registers** (*Geburtsregister*) only become freely accessible after **110 years**, the **marriage registers** (*Heiratsregister*) after **80 years** and the death registers (*Sterberegister*) after **30 years**. Within these blocking periods information can only be obtained for direct ancestors, i.e. parents, grandparents, etc.

If you want **information from the civil status registers**, there are always to contact points: The local municipality or city archive (*Gemeinde- oder Stadtarchiv*) resp. the registry office (*Standesamt*) is one option, the state archive in Detmold is the other option.

Before 1874, we had to rely on the **church records** resp. **parish registers** (*Kirchenbücher*), in which baptisms, marriages and funerals were recorded. As mentioned, the **duplicates** from the years 1815-1874 are in the State Archives in Detmold and can be viewed there.

Fortunately, the **church archives** have started to make digital copies of the original church records accessible online. The **Archdiocese Archive Paderborn** (*Erzbistumsarchiv Paderborn*) and the **Diocese Archive Münster** (*Bistumsarchiv Münster*) participate in the **online portal "Matricula"** (**data.matricula-online.eu)**. The offer is free, registration is not required. Paderborn is still in the development phase, Münster has already largely completed the work. Unfortunately, the **Essen diocese archive** (*Bistumsarchiv Essen*) is not yet involved in Matricula. Although Essen is in the Rhineland, it is also responsible for the Catholic communities in the Westphalian part of the Ruhr area.

The church records from the areas of the **Evangelical Church of Westphalia** (*Evangelische Kirche von Westfalen*) and the **Lippe Regional Church** (*Lippische Landeskirche*) are available on the

„Archion" online portal (www.archion.de). However, you have to register there and pay usage fees.

The **beginning of the church records** varies greatly from parish to parish. A few begin as early as the 16th century, the majority in the 17th century, but due to accidents, some church registers not until the 18th century. The level of detail in the entries is also very individual, and there are also gaps in the tradition. You also have to know the **traditions of name inheritance in Westphalia** in order not to get on the wrong track, but more on that another time.

In addition to **civil status registers** and **church registers**, there are many other rich sources for genealogical researches, for example extensive records of **land registers** *(Grundbücher)*, **base files** *(Grundakten)* and **wills** (*Testamente*) from the 19th and early 20th centuries in the Detmold and Münster state archives. There are also important records in the city archives; the archivists there are also much better acquainted with the local conditions. Many city archives have genealogical information and reference books on their websites.

The **archives in North Rhine-Westphalia** jointly operate an online portal, **www.archive.nrw.de**. You can find more information about using this archive portal on our website **www.wggf.de**.