

Locating Russian Empire Metrical Books in Archives

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Overview: *Learn about how to find Russian Empire metrical books (religious records of births, marriages, and deaths) in archives using online resources like the Metrics.tilda.ws. Learn tips for how to access these archival records on archive websites or offline through correspondence or an archive visit.*

Introduction

While there have been isolated cases of records lost, the Soviet Union by and large preserved historical records, including religious records of births, marriages, and deaths, known as metrical books. These records remain to this day primarily in government archives. Tens of millions of images have been digitized and put online. However, billions more records are still in original paper form. Their whereabouts can be determined by researching archive inventory finding aids with the help of portal sites like Metrics.tilda.ws.

Nearly all records available for the former USSR and Russian Empire are obtained from archives, whether you visit them in person, use correspondence, hire a researcher, or access copies digitally or on microfilm. Whatever the method of access, it is important to understand more about how records are organized in archive. If you are going to visit an archive yourself, you need to be prepared. When corresponding with the archive or hiring a researcher, understanding archival arrangement and research procedures will help you frame better research requests and manage your expectations for results, time required, and costs.

Knowing how the records are organized in the archives will help you even when accessing digital or microfilm copies of records. Preserving the original archival arrangement and providing metadata such as archival reference numbers is the best practice for genealogical societies and commercial or non-profit organizations to follow when acquiring copies of records. The arrangement of the records online reflects to some degree the way they are organized in the archive.

Archival System Structure

Archives in the countries of the former Soviet Union consist of these main types:

- **National/Federal** - Located in the capital with branches in major cities. There may be multiple archive facilities divided by era (Imperial, Soviet, modern) and/or type (historical, military, art, science, etc.). National historical archives have many genealogical records, including metrical books.
- **State/Regional** – Each oblast or equivalent state-level region has a state historical archive. The bulk of the genealogical records, including metrical books (mainly

transcripts) are kept here. Since Soviet times civil registration of birth, marriage, and death records, have been required to be transferred to state archives after 75 years.

- **Local** – City and county (district) level archives may also have metrical books or other genealogical records. Original copies may be found here or in the original parish or synagogue (if those survived) or in the religious leader's home.

In Russia and most other former Soviet countries, the archive system is managed at the national level. State and local archives and civil registration offices are to some degree part of the national system in the respective countries, governed by national archive law, though regional and local archives may retain some degree of autonomy. When it comes to digitization projects, the national archive administration may allow the state archives to negotiate on their own or those agreements may be managed at the national level. In any case, the national archival administration may assert its authority at any time.

While the situation in archives can vary widely in terms of their holdings, organizational structure, and reading room protocols, there are also many similarities. By understanding a few key points, you can learn how to prepare yourself whether or are visiting the archive or accessing the records in some other way.

Archive Records Organization

There is a science to organizing information in an archive, somewhat like cataloging in libraries. But while library materials usually have a straightforward title, author, and publication date, which may be used as search terms, archival materials tend to be unpublished papers without clearly defined titles or even authors, in the usual sense.

In most cases, archival materials are organized according to the entity that created the record, such as a government agency, church institution, school, business, or individual who generated the records. Archives are often referred to as repositories, because they are the designated place for certain organizations to deposit their records.

When archives receive records, they accession them, which means to organize them, create an inventory, and assign an accession number (archive reference number) to each item. They also place them into archival storage boxes, folders, etc. In the process, they will assess the condition and perform any preservation and repair necessary.

Russian archival records are organized into large record groups (collections), which may be divided into different record group inventories (sub-collections or series), which in turn consist of individual items (such as a book, file folder, box, etc.). Each of these units has a number and together they form a unique archival reference number. The Russian terms for these are:



фонд (fond) – Record group (collection or fund), often abbreviated as ф.

опись (opis) – Inventory (sub-collection or series), often abbreviated as оп. or just о. The same word also means inventory listing (finding aid.)

дело (delo) - Item, such as an individual book, box, or file folder, or even a single document). Often abbreviated as д. Plural is дела.

For example, ф. 1290 оп. 4 д. 84 refers to record group 1290, inventory number 4, and item number 84. An example of a record group would be all the records for a particular diocese of the Roman Catholic Church. Inventory 1 might be the administrative records for the diocese. Inventory 4 could be the metrical books for that diocese (church registers of births, marriages, and deaths). There will also be an inventory listing (finding aid, also called opis) for each inventory (sub-collection). An item example would be the records for a specific church for one year. The items in an inventory usually have some kind of logical arrangement, such as alphabetically by parish and then chronologically within the parish.

Searching Archive Holdings

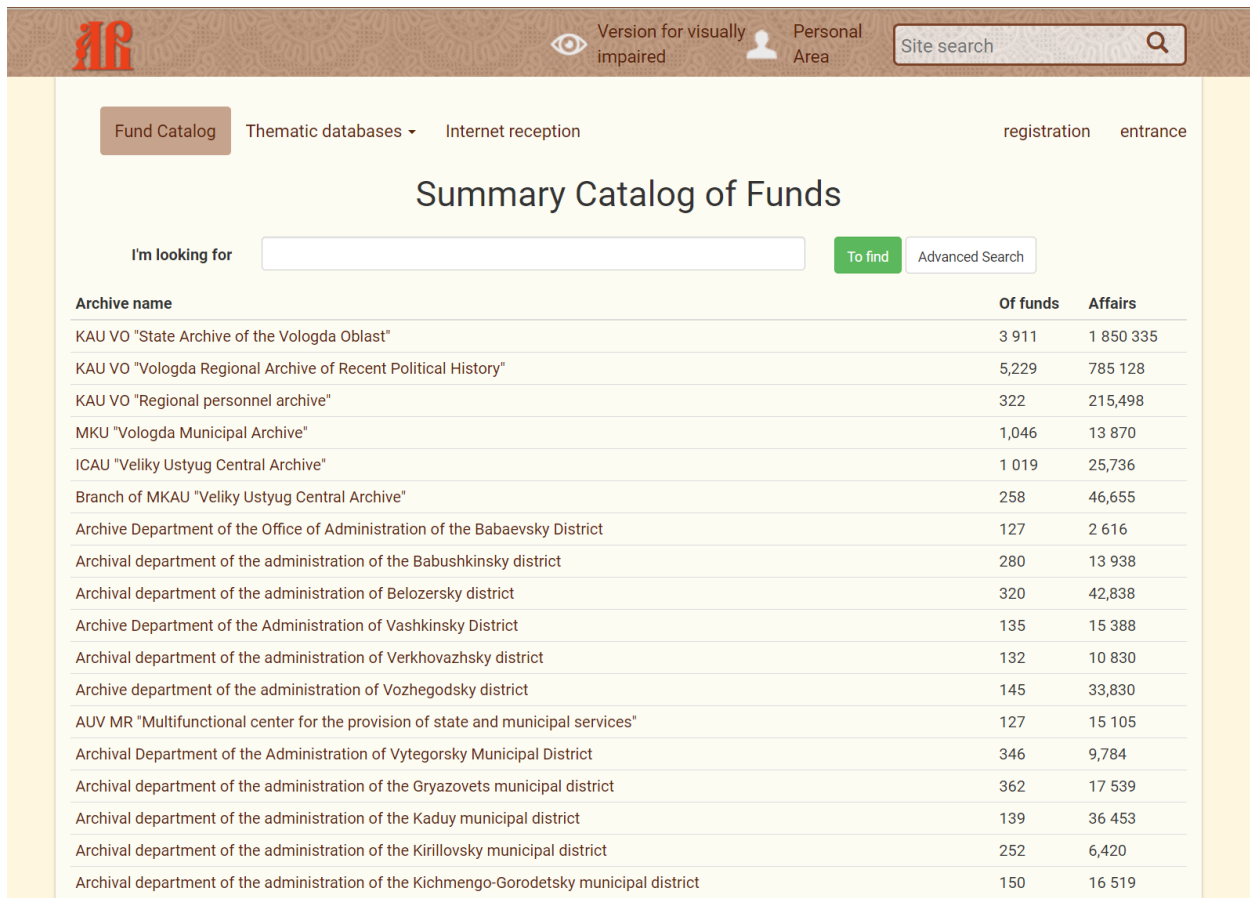
Before attempting to obtain records from an archive, you need to make sure that they have the records you need. Unlike libraries, where each may have a copy of the same book, archives generally have one-of-a-kind materials. Unless a microfilm or digital copy has been made, or the information is compiled in a published book, the information you are looking for may exist only in a particular archive. How are you to know where to look?

There is no simple answer to this question, especially in Eastern Europe, where things are further complicated by historical boundary changes and records for one place may be found in the archive of a different county, province, or even country than where the place is located today. For example, for areas of Ukraine that were once part of Poland, and before that, Austria, records may be found in Polish, Austrian, as well as Ukrainian archives. A knowledge of the current and

historical state/province and county boundaries is essential to determining the archives to check, as well as to navigating to the records within the archives.

Catalogs and other Finding aids

Archives usually have catalogs and other finding aids that list their holdings and facilitate access. They can vary in the level of detail from a summary list of the types of records the archive has to a complete catalog listing details of every item. Finding aids may be online on the archive's website, published in a book, or available only in the archive reading room reference area. Online and published finding aids often provide only general details about collections and subcollections. For specific itemized descriptions you may need to consult an unpublished finding aid in the archive reading room.



The screenshot shows the website of the Vologda State Archives. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a logo, a search bar, and links for 'Version for visually impaired', 'Personal Area', and 'Site search'. Below the navigation bar, there are links for 'Fund Catalog', 'Thematic databases', and 'Internet reception'. The main heading is 'Summary Catalog of Funds'. Below this, there is a search bar with the text 'I'm looking for' and a 'To find' button. To the right of the search bar is a link for 'Advanced Search'. Below the search bar is a table with three columns: 'Archive name', 'Of funds', and 'Affairs'. The table lists 20 different archival funds, including the State Archive of the Vologda Oblast, the Vologda Regional Archive of Recent Political History, and various municipal and district archives.

Archive name	Of funds	Affairs
KAU VO "State Archive of the Vologda Oblast"	3 911	1 850 335
KAU VO "Vologda Regional Archive of Recent Political History"	5,229	785 128
KAU VO "Regional personnel archive"	322	215,498
MKU "Vologda Municipal Archive"	1,046	13 870
ICAU "Veliky Ustyug Central Archive"	1 019	25,736
Branch of MKAU "Veliky Ustyug Central Archive"	258	46,655
Archive Department of the Office of Administration of the Babaevsky District	127	2 616
Archival department of the administration of the Babushkinsky district	280	13 938
Archival department of the administration of Belozersky district	320	42,838
Archive Department of the Administration of Vashkinsky District	135	15 388
Archival department of the administration of Verkhovazhsky district	132	10 830
Archive department of the administration of Vozhegodsky district	145	33,830
AUV MR "Multifunctional center for the provision of state and municipal services"	127	15 105
Archival Department of the Administration of Vytegorsky Municipal District	346	9,784
Archival department of the administration of the Gryazovets municipal district	362	17 539
Archival department of the administration of the Kaduy municipal district	139	36 453
Archival department of the administration of the Kirillovsky municipal district	252	6,420
Archival department of the administration of the Kichmengo-Gorodetsky municipal district	150	16 519

Vologda State Archives catalog (via Google Translate). Clicking these funds (record groups) shows details down to the individual items. <https://gosarchive.gov35.ru/archive>

МЕТРИЧЕСКИЕ КНИГИ ЦЕРКВЕЙ КИШИНЕВСКОГО УЕЗДА БЕССАРАБИИ

ОПИСЬ № 3

Дела долговременного хранения
за 1812-1921 гг.

№ п/п	Индексы дел	Заголовки дел	Крайние д а т ы	К-во листов	Прим
1	2	3	4	5	6
		<u>1812 год</u>			
1.		Метрические книги церквей Кишиневского уезда Бессарабии			15
		<u>1818 год</u>			
2.	То же				1
		<u>1819 год</u>			
3.	То же				15
		<u>1820 год</u>			
4.	То же				1
		<u>1821 год</u>			
5.	То же				15
		<u>1825 год</u>			

Unpublished finding aid for an inventory of metrical books of Bessarabia uyezd (now Moldova), FamilySearch, FHL microfilm 2060634, item 1, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-89SV-R981-X?i=5&cat=787430>

Sometimes finding aids have been microfilmed or digitized. When they were still microfilming in the former Soviet countries, FamilySearch's standard was to microfilm the finding aid before capturing the records. Unfortunately, this practice is not consistently followed today. Finding aids are very helpful when records are not indexed, as is usually the case. They are also helpful for cataloging records and identifying waypoints for image browsing.

Besides finding aids created by the archive, you may be able to find other published guides, online wikis, special interest group pages, or genealogical society sites that provide information about the whereabouts of records. Look for the archive's official website and study what information they provide there. While an archivist may not respond to a specific research query, they may be willing to answer questions about their holdings. For example, "Do you have civil registration records for x province from the 1890s?" However, try to search for the answer before you ask. Archivists post information online so they don't have to respond to so many questions.

Archive Websites and Portals

In general, national and regional archives have web sites. Archive websites may include the following:

- Directions to the archive, using the reading room, sending queries, etc.
- Links to affiliated archives, or for national archive sites, to the national archive branches and regional archives.
- Descriptions of holdings (varies from broad descriptions to detailed databases listing contents of specific record groups, series, and files.)
- In some cases, digital image databases or indexes

Archive portal sites aggregate information from multiple archives to help in locating individual archives and information about their holdings, services etc. For more detailed information, the portal sites link to the individual archive sites. Archives sites and archive portal sites are usually in the native language. To navigate them, you will need to either know the language well enough or use tools like the Google Chrome “translate to English” feature.

Here are some key websites for archives in Russia and some other former Russian Empire/USSR countries.

Russian Archives Portal (<http://rusarchives.ru/>) Official site of the Russian Federal Archive agency. Provides information about the Russian archival system, including links to federal and regional archives (state, district, city) with information for each archive, giving location and contact information, URLs of individual archive website, and other information. There is also a central catalog of archive collections (Центральный фондовый каталог, translated as "Central Stock Catalog" by Google translate). This catalog includes information about the record collections located in archives across Russia. It is not comprehensive as not all archives have provided their inventory metadata yet. You can use this portal to search for metrical book collections to find out what archives they are in and what the archival reference numbers are (fond, opis, and delo).

Metrics (Metrical Books) Website (<http://metrics.tilda.ws/>)

This website, known by researchers as the Metrics or Metrical Books website, is officially called Где искать метрические книги? (Where to search for metrical books?) and it provides a guide to finding genealogically important records including metrical books (births, marriages, and deaths, confession lists) as well as extant 1897 census records. It also includes resources for determining the location of the parish, and for accessing archive catalogs to search for other records. The site is focused at present on Russian Orthodox metrical books. It includes collections in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

The Metrics site is organized by country and then by region and provides links to archival finding aids or catalogs describing the records and giving their archival reference numbers (fond, opis, delo). Where records are available online, it provides links to those as well.

To use the site to find metrical book collections, you first select the country. Russia is divided into two sections, one for Russian state archives starting with letters A-M and the other for the N through the rest of the alphabet. Next you can select or scroll down to find the specific state-level region (oblast, okrug, kray, autonomous republic, etc.), arranged in Russian alphabetical order.

For each state-level region, the portal includes an overview of what the archive has in terms of metrical books. Note that there is a description of what historical territories are included in the metrical book collections. Since state and county-level boundaries changed from the Russian Empire guberniyas to now, the current state will include parts of one or more historic guberniyas (or provinces) and counties (uyezds or districts).

The information includes links to more detailed information about the metrical book collections in archive finding aids (aka archive inventories). These may be in HTML and therefore able to be translated or they may be PDFs as in this case, which unfortunately you have to deal with in Russian (or in Ukrainian or Belarusian as the case may be.) If any of the records are online, there will be mention of it here with some information about how to access them and a link. This includes records that FamilySearch has digitized. If the records are not online, which is still the case for the majority, the site is useful to help determine the archival reference number and item description of specific metrical books, so that you can request the item at the archive or as a record lookup via correspondence.

Sample Russian Archives Sites with Online Records

Some archives sites in Russia are putting their own records online. Here are just a couple of examples. Hopefully, more archives will follow their lead.

Pokoleniia Permskovo Kraya (Generations of the Perm Region) (pokolenia.permkrai.ru/)

Includes over 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. This is a unique example of a Russian state (regional) archive digitizing their own records..

National Archives in St. Petersburg (<https://spbarchives.ru/>) – Portal to National Archives in St. Petersburg, including the National Historical Archives, with information about holdings, archive access procedures, etc. Also includes some online image databases for genealogical records, including civil registration. Registration to the site is free, but there is a fee of 77 rubles per day to view images, with discounts for weekly or biweekly passes.

Other National Archives Sites

Archives in other former Russian Empire/USSR countries are organized similarly to Russian archives, as they all used to be part of the same Soviet archive system. There are national archive websites and sites for individual regional archives. The records are also organized by record

group, series, and file, with collections often organized according to the old Russian Empire locations.

The University of Illinois has posted a [list of links to national archive sites for Eastern Europe](#), including the former Soviet countries. This site also includes information about archival terminology and general information about procedures, organization, and guides to researching in archives.

Here are links to national archives sites for some of the other former Soviet Countries:

- **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. See also the archives for Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, which may include material for Belarus.
- **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.
- **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.
- **Lithuanian Archives Administration** (<http://www.archyvai.lt/lt/lvat.html>) Provides information on accessing Lithuanian archives, with links to archives, search interfaces for a national database and contact information for the archives.
- **Lithuanian 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.)
- **Poland State Archives - 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).
- **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. Non online collections of genealogical interest yet. Much of the site is available in English. See also Poland and Russia sites which include records for Ukraine.

Visiting an Archive

Unlike libraries, archives do not lend their materials to patrons. In some cases, they might transcribe information or send digital or paper copies of records, depending on the level of service they offer, usually for a fee, but the originals stay in the archive. Also, unlike libraries, archive materials are usually not in open stacks. You cannot just browse the collections and look at whatever you want off the shelf. Instead, you need to access materials in a reading room, a controlled environment under supervision of an archivist, where you request items to be retrieved for you.

It is vital that you understand the rules for viewing archival materials in the reading room before you visit. In general, such rules are posted on the archive web site, in detail. Or you may contact the archive to inquire about the rules. Again, look at all of the information they have posted online first before you bother contacting them, and then only ask for the information you need to clarify if it is not already clear in the online instructions.

The screenshot shows the 'cultinfo' website with a red navigation bar. The main content area is titled 'Reading room of the State Archives of the Vologda Region'. It features a photo of a reading room, a sidebar with links to 'Archives', 'State Archives of the Vologda Region: contacts', 'Structure', 'History', 'Documents', 'NSA', 'Guide to the GAVO funds', 'Publications', 'Services', 'Inquiries', 'Reading room', and 'Anti-corruption'. The main text includes 'Reading room opening hours', 'Chief archivist', and a notice about pre-registration starting from September 1.

Reading room opening hours: Mon. - Thurs. : from 9.00 to 16.30, lunch from 12.30 to 13.30. Fri. - cleaning day (user service is not performed). Sat. - Sun. - day off.
Tel. : 72-34-62. The reading room is closed in August.
The management of the archive has the right to change the operating mode of the reading room by notifying the users in advance.

Chief archivist - Olga Vasilievna Glukhanova, tel. : 72-34-62.

Dear Researchers!

We would like to inform you that some provisions of the Rules for the User's Work in the Reading Room have changed (order of the director of the archive dated 12.07.2016 No. 30).

From September 1, **pre-registration in the reading room** is introduced. According to clause 2.4 of the Rules (as amended), the order of visiting the reading room is as follows.

A visit to the reading room is carried out on reception days by appointment. The number of seats for work by appointment in the reading room is 16.

Recording is made directly at the employee of the reading room or by phone (8172) 72-34-62. The entry is accepted directly from the user planning to visit the reading room and order cases.

The user has the right to sign up for the following periods of time: from 9-00 to 12-30, from 13-30 to 16-30, from 9-00 to 16-30. Pre-registration is carried out no more than two months in advance; with a constant visit to the reading room, it can be made for no more than 8 working days in a row.

Reading room instructions, Vologda State Archive (via Google translate). <http://cultinfo.ru/archives/state-archives-of-the-vologda-region/reading-room/>

Rules for reading rooms vary, but there are also many common themes. In general, reading room rules are designed to protect the archival records from damage or theft and to maintain an orderly and manageable flow. You will usually be limited to ordering a small number of items at once, maybe even just one or two. Archivists do not want to retrieve more items than you will have time to research. You might be prohibited from having a camera or other recording device with you. Pens are almost never allowed, nor are bags. You will usually have to lock your belongings, except perhaps for a pencil and notepad.

It is common in the countries of the former USSR to have strict reading room protocols. You must register to use the reading room. This might need to be done a day or two in advance. You may also need to order the archive items you wish to view in advance. Some archives allow you to register and order materials online before you visit the archive while others require you to do both of those things in person.

It is very important to know before you go. There have been many disappointed researchers hoping to visit several archives on their trip only to find that they needed an extra 2-4 days just to register at each and order materials, and then face restrictions on how many items they can order.

Once you finally obtain your materials in the reading room, there may be more rules, such as only having one person look at the materials--and only the items that you have ordered. (No sharing!) If you are researching with someone else, then, you may need to divide up and search the items independently of one another, while observing strict silence while in the reading room.

You also need to be aware of the rules for copies. Does the reading room allow you to make copies, or can you only write down the information? If copies are allowed, can you make your own using your phone, or do you have to use the archive's equipment. Are their fees? Sometimes you must pay a fee, even if you are using your own camera. And do not assume the fees will be nominal copying fees. Some archives will charge several dollars per copy.

The more you know, the better your experience will be. **The key is to do your homework.** Learn as much information about your ancestor beforehand as possible. Know what the town is called now and what it was called historically, and what the modern and historic jurisdiction (uyezd, guberniya, etc.) are, so you can locate it in the finding aid. If an archivist sees that you are going to require a lot of hand-holding they may be anxious to see you go. They may even say they don't have what you are looking for, just so they don't have to bother with you! So be prepared, or bring someone along—a native speaker who understands the rules and can help you navigate the archive and the archivists. (They can be a big help in reading the records too!)

Archivists in the former USSR don't necessarily have the same concept of customer service as we are accustomed to in North America. They may seem impatient or even rude. They do not necessarily mean to be. They are just doing their job of protecting the records and making sure everyone is following the rules.



*Reading Room in Zhytomir Archives, Ukraine, 2013.
Image by Joe Everett.*

Maybe you will decide you are not up for a visit. If not, you may appreciate more what a paid researcher is doing for you. If you are up to the task of visiting, you can be in for a very rewarding experience. There are few joys as great as looking at the original paper documents with your ancestor's name on it in faded ink, just as it was written a century or more ago.

Corresponding

Archives in the former USSR are hit and miss when it comes to responsiveness to correspondence. It depends on the attitudes of the archive director and the individuals on staff. Some archives may not respond at all. Others may respond within a few weeks. In general, the experience is that archives more likely than not to either not respond, to take a long time responding, or to provide limited assistance.

Nonetheless, it can be worth trying, if there is no alternative to accessing the records, and if you can't afford to hire a local researcher to do it. For best results, make your requests as specific as possible. Again, do your homework by using available catalogs and finding aids to look up where the records are located, and what the archival reference numbers are. Provide the most specific information you can in your ancestral query, giving names, dates and places as specifically and accurately as possible. Research the historical place name and record jurisdiction, so that you can tell them the historic uyezd (county) and guberniya (province) the ancestor's town was in, as the records are usually organized by those jurisdictions. Don't ask for too many records at once and try to narrow down the search as much as possible. If you can obtain very specific information from an index, so much the better. If not, narrow it down as much as possible, as they do not have the resources or the inclination to hunt through volumes of records to find your ancestors.

Hiring a Researcher

In general, hiring a trusted and skilled local researcher to look up the records for you is the best approach. Someone who knows the records, methods, and language and with the personality to work with archivists. But buyer beware. There are scammers who will charge exorbitant prices for poor quality research. Get a referral from someone who has worked with a researcher before and can vouch for the quality of their service and the fairness of prices. Again, the more you understand the process as we have described here, the better you will understand what seems reasonable to charge for services. Remember to account for travel, access fees, copy fees, and other red tape. A good researcher can obtain fantastic results.