

NACH KANADA!

IMMIGRATION OF GERMANS TO CANADA

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About 10 per cent of the people in Canada claim German ancestry, according to the 2023 census – although the details can be a bit murky. The immigration of Germans to Canada has not been straightforward, with differences depending on the time period.

Gerhard P. Bassler, who did extensive research into Canada's Germans, determined that there were six major waves of German immigration. These groups were: the first settlers to 1776; the wave generated by the American Revolution from 1776 to 1820; immigration to Upper Canada (Ontario) from 1830 to 1880; immigration to Western Canada from 1874 to 1914; immigration between the world wars; and immigration since 1945, which included people who had been displaced at the end of the Second World War.

To quote Bassler: "Canada's main source of Germans was Russia — especially from the Volga, the Black Sea coast and Volhynia. The next largest number came from Austria-Hungary, especially Galicia and the colonies of the so-called Danube Swabians along the Danube River between Austria and Romania. Transylvanian Saxons arrived as labor migrants in the 1920s and refugees in the 1950s. The remaining East European origins were Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland and the Baltic lands.

"Germans arrived in Canada with such diverse citizenships as Austrian, Swiss, Luxembourgian, Hungarian, Russian, French and American; with a variety of regional identities, such as Palatine, Bavarian, Saxon, Burgenländer, Sudeten, Danube Swabian, Baltic, Alsatian and Pennsylvania Dutch; and with such religious allegiances as Mennonite, Hutterite, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Moravian and Jewish. Their mother tongues included High German, Low German, Pennsylvania Dutch and numerous regional dialects. From their homelands and histories of previous migrations, German-speaking immigrants transplanted a mosaic of German cultures, including ancestral traits extinct in Germany as well as unique adaptations to non-German environments."

Please refer to the [Canadian Encyclopedia](#) website for more of Bassler's information.

Immigration sources

The first choice for information about an arrival will often be ship passenger lists, which represent the most comprehensive source available. Most Germans came to Canada by crossing the Atlantic Ocean, although some of them would have gone to the United States or a South American country first. Canadian passenger lists covering 1865 through 1935 are available for research.



The key immigration ports on the Atlantic Ocean are shown above. Passenger lists for arrivals at Quebec, the busiest port in Canada, are available from 1865 to 1935. Records from Halifax, Nova Scotia, begin in 1881, when substantial immigration began, and Saint John, New Brunswick, in 1900, also the year when the port saw a sharp increase in traffic.

Spotty records exist for the years before 1865. Some early records have been indexed and placed online. Coverage is by no means comprehensive, but these sites should be checked:

- Findmypast has a [database](#) of some immigrants before 1854.
- The Olive Tree Genealogy site has [many links](#) to old passenger lists.

Look for arrival information in other sources, such as local histories, newspaper accounts and census returns. The 1901 census shows the year of immigration, but memories can be weak.

In the early 1920s, the government did not use regular passenger lists, but required individual forms for each person that were filed, and later microfilmed, in rough alphabetical order. These are also available online through Ancestry and Library and Archives Canada.

If you cannot find your immigrants in ship records, do not despair. It is just as important to find out all that you can about their journey here, including why they left their homeland, and what conditions were like on ships.

Links to Canadian immigration sources are at [CanGenealogy](#). Four websites should get most of your attention.

- **Library and Archives Canada (LAC)** has an extensive [collection](#) of documents regarding immigration, naturalization and citizenship.

- **Ancestry** has been responsible for much of the digitizing, and has worked with Library and Archives Canada. All Canadian government records on the Ancestry site will eventually be available on the Library and Archives Canada website. Go to [Ancestry.ca](#).

- **FamilySearch.org** includes material relating to immigration; check the catalog under Canada, emigration and immigration. Note that you will find records showing travel both ways across the border. The collection includes [Passenger lists 1881-1922](#).

- **Findmypast** has a [database](#) of people outbound from ports in the British Isles. Some people from continental Europe went to England on the first stage of their migration to North America. Coverage is to 1960.

Also check the [Ellis Island index](#) and other American sources. (Many people going to American destinations went through Canadian ports. It was often a matter of finding the cheapest way to cross the ocean, rather than picking a specific route.)

Records of entry at land crossings into Canada are available on the Ancestry site, but there is not much information and the records cover only 1908 through 1935. The collection is based on digitized microfilms at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa.

Once in Canada, people coming from non-Commonwealth countries could become naturalized. Canadian citizenship did not exist until 1947; until then, the best a person could do was to be naturalized as a British subject.

Naturalization files up to 1917 have been destroyed, although there are indexes of names from early records for [Montreal](#) and [Ontario](#) at Library and Archives Canada. From 1917 through 1951, the names of people naturalized were listed in the *Canada Gazette*, a federal government publication, and a [database](#) is on the Library and Archives Canada site. This index refers to files; copies can be ordered from the Access to Information and Privacy Division of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

There are several reasons why immigrants might not appear in databases. Perhaps they came to Canada before 1865, and the passenger list no longer exists. If they came to Canada from Europe after 1865 – the start of passenger lists for Quebec – then perhaps they came through another Canadian port, one that did not yet have passenger lists. Or perhaps they came through the United States.

It is also possible that they are on a passenger list, but not in the database. Sometimes there were mistakes, possibly because the original documents were too difficult to read. Search a database by first name only, with no family name, and you will see how many family names

could not be read or were not included for another reason.

A name might have been omitted or mistranscribed. Check every source available, even after a likely ancestor has been found. There are differences between records. In the 20th century, for example, the English outbound ship lists did not necessarily match the inbound Canadian ones.

Online databases should lead you to the passenger lists themselves. Always check the original document; never be satisfied with the information from the database. Always cross-check the information found on an original document.

After arriving in Canada, many Germans were in contact with regional consular offices. The Bundesarchiv, Germany's national archive, has [consular records](#) created by the Winnipeg and Nain (Newfoundland and Labrador) offices in the 1930s.

Finding places in Germany

If you are looking for a location in modern-day Germany, try contemporary sources first. Along with [Google Maps](#), use sites such as [Mapcarta](#) and [ViaMichelin](#) to find places.

An extensive [Meyers Orts](#) website has been created from based on the best-known gazetteer. (Meyers Orts is short for Meyers Orts- und Verkehrslexikon des Deutschen Reich.)

Another good source is the [Virtual Kartenforum](#), a comprehensive map site based at the Saxony State and University Library in Dresden. Most of the maps have been georeferenced, which is another way of saying that you can search for a name to find an image of the map you need.

A great finding aid for finding locations east of the Oder-Neisse line is [Kartenmeister](#), a comprehensive database with 109,922 locations with more than 45,000 name changes once, and 5,500 twice and more. The coverage area is based on the borders of the eastern provinces in spring 1918, including East Prussia, Memel, West Prussia, Brandenburg, Posen, Pomerania, and Silesia.

Suggested reading:

Bassler, Gerhard P.: [German Canadians](#) on the Canadian Encyclopedia website.

Lehmann, Heinz: *The German Canadians 1750-1937*, translated, edited and introduced by Gerhard P. Bassler. St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador: Jespersion Press, 1986.

Wagner, Jonathan: *A History of Migration from Germany to Canada 1850-1939*. Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press, 2006.

Obee, Dave. *Destination Canada: A Genealogical Guide to Immigration Records*. Victoria, B.C.: Dave Obee, 2010.

LINKS ARE AT CANGENEALOGY.COM

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