

Blomberg, Kathryn Pope

Discovering Russian Research: Digitizing Local and Family Historical Documents

Faculty Mentor: Thom Edlund, HBLL-Cataloging

As a student of Family History Research with Russian language skills, I have become very interested in learning the process of research for the areas that have been controlled by either the Czars or the USSR. Thus, I decided to go on an internship to a Russian speaking country to compliment my studies in Imperial Russian and Soviet genealogical research. Although I am a novice or maybe especially since I am a novice I felt this would be very beneficial to my studies.

My faculty mentor Thom Edlund and I developed a project that would enable me to further my understanding of Russian research in the Eastern European archival system while searching for documents and understanding yet untapped in the historical field. My project was to search for examples of old Czarist Russian travel documents. These would later be analyzed by Professor Edlund. He will determine their historical significance, based on the information that was or was not included in the documents, and use this information for future publication.

The documents themselves are historically significant. It was Russian law that anyone traveling beyond the border of their own village, or anyone moving, had to have a document which granted them permission to do so. What information was included? What was the format? In addition, if one could track these documents down (if they still exist) they would also aid research regarding the peasants. The peasants and lower classes are generally the hardest group of people to research. This would bring forward new information about them. My internship and ORCA project became intertwined; information learned through the one benefited the other and vice-versa. The greater hope is that my experiences will not only assist me by organizing my own knowledge but that it could assist others in their research.

I was an intern at the Central Historical Archive of Ukraine in Kiev. There I worked under the direction of the archive's director Olga Muzychuk. Through a series of private sessions she devoted several hours to showing me the archive, explaining its history and internal organization. Beyond these sessions with her I was also assigned to work in the different divisions, under the division leaders. Through their tutelage and ready assistance (due to the fact that I was there on an internship) I learned how the archive was organized. This was vital for me to begin searching. The internship allowed me extra privileges for my research. These included extra assistance by the employees and the ability to capture the documents in picture images (both of which would have been otherwise denied without payment far beyond my means).

The organization of an Eastern European archive, as inferred, is different than the Western system. In addition, there is no computer index. Furthermore, the archive houses a vast amount of original documents, many thousands of which have never been accessed, nor listed in the catalogue or other listings. Learning about the indexing, I realized it would be a hit-and-miss, luck-of-the-draw search. Despite this, I hoped to stumble across one or more of the travel document variations, in an actual document, a form, or a government record detailing the information which should be included in the passport.

I created a three part methodology. In the first approach I utilized their card catalogue. Their card catalogue is organized in three major divisions: by names of people/ organizations, by geography, and by subject. It fills an entire room but it is in no way comprehensive. The cards were made because they provide easier access to the most requested and most famous topics in Ukrainian History. I hoped to find cards catalogued under the organization which would have created these passports.

The second approach was to use their default system, (the system used if there are no entries in the card catalogue). This requires one to determine a topic based on the above card catalogue divisions. Using this they search first the *Putevoditel'* (a published work, thematically listing all of the *fond's* housed in the archive), discover the *fond* (collections of documents based on a specific person or organization) and *opis'es* (thematic subdivisions), and hope there is a listing which documents the individual *delo's* (documents).

The third approach recognized the chance that I may never stumble across a single travel document and that the travel documents, if they exist, only exist in one of the *fond's* which has never been opened. Therefore, I asked the employees in the Ancient Acts (documents from the earliest dated records they have in the archive up through the end of the 18th century) to let me know if they saw any documents that seemed like they might be what I was looking for.

The goal of all three approaches was to find possible file numbers, request the documents, study them and determine if they were travel documents. If they seemed to be travel documents I would then take a picture of the document. Not counting on the third approach I utilized the first two approaches following the outlined pattern, searching under organizations which created the passports.

Through this I ran across a couple of problems which hindered my research. The first problem was unanticipated, a problem of linguistics. I had assumed that my Russian knowledge would be sufficient. (Most Ukrainians know Russian, and the documents that I would be looking at would be in Russian.) Unfortunately, most of the card catalogue entries and their *opis* listings were in Ukrainian. I had to record possibilities and approach an employee to ask if the meaning was as I thought. Often their responses convinced me that the 'possibilities' would not lead me to the travel documents I was searching for. The second problem was the difficulty of deciphering the old documents, once they were in hand. Many of them were faded and all of them variations of old Slavonic handwriting. Reading and comprehension was slower than anticipated.

As it turned out, the third approach in my methodology paid off. Victoria Leonidovna, an employee in Ancient acts, had stumbled across a file which was purported to be a passport. I was waiting for this document to be sent to the reading hall when I discovered my camera was not working as needed. However, a friend I had made in Kiev, on hearing of my predicament, loaned me his digital camera on the last day of research in Ukraine. I then took pictures of these new documents and all others that I had ordered and had not ruled out. These pictures have now been downloaded by Professor Edlund and I also have the memory disk. We both now have the task of further analyzing these documents. Hopefully with complete transcription and translation they will prove to be of historical value.