

Gubernia Official Journals as an Alternative Source for Genealogical Searches

Iwona Dakiniewicz, Łódź, Poland
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Official journals are associated more with legal communiques thick with statute numbers and codices than with sources for genealogical searchers. True, the journals contained notices of that sort. No less than 70% of their contents, however, related to personal announcements of ordinary citizens.

The journals were published from 1817 under the name of “voivodeship journals,” and from 1838 on as “*gubernia* journals.” Obviously, this deals only with the territories of the Russian partition as it existed then. Familiarity with the geographical and administrative divisions at the time has a practical application here.

And so, in 1817, there were eight voivodeships, with capitals in Augustów, Kalisz, Kraków, Lublin, Mazowsze, Płock, Podlasie, and Sandomierz. In 1837, these were the *gubernie*: Augustów, Kalisz, Kraków, Lublin, Mazowsze, Płock, Podlasie, and Sandomierz. During the period 1845–67, the number decreased to five: Augustów, Lublin, Płock, Radom, and Warszawa. In 1867, their number returned to eight: Kalisz, Kielce, Lublin, Łomża, Piotrków, Płock, Radom, Siedlce, Suwałki, and Warszawa. In 1893, Płock and Łomża gubernie vanished, and in 1912, Chełm gubernia appeared (formed from parts of Siedlce and Lublin gubernie) and Siedlce departed.

These first publications were quite modest, two-three pages. Over the course of time, they grew in size, and eventually, supplements were printed for some issues. The structure of the notices was based on administrative hierarchy: from gubernia declarations and resolutions by announcement of local units, *starostwa*, town halls, and gminy. We find communiques from various departments: police, military, treasury, land registry, to affairs of religion, estates, and forests. They are all loaded with personal information, and sometimes contain descriptions of whole families. The content of the information depends on the context of the notice and the zeal of the former officials; sometimes they are concise, but sometimes they provide a surprising wealth of knowledge unattainable in any parish registers—for example, detailed descriptions of physical stature, face, any disabilities, clothing worn. They also specify social status, property owned, potential conflict with the law, and even disposition of character. A true gold mine of knowledge about our ancestors!

The question remains, how to use a key to seek out information on our ancestors among the tens of thousands of journals published. Geographical location by gubernia would seem to be a valid clue; but there are no guarantees, because a great many of the notices came from the administrative units in whose territory the events took place, and not those from which the person described came. Estimating the time of the notice becomes rather difficult; but if we seek information on estates or inheritances, then it is best to focus on yearbooks closest to the ancestor’s date of death. One must, however, note that many inheritance cases took place at much later dates. Age of military conscription may be a key term, because desertion was not rare then.

A great many of the notices do not fall under any sort of searching logic; the effectiveness of the search depends more on a lucky break, and on the determination of the researcher. These hard-to-pin-down notices usually deal with prisoners of war, fallen soldiers, victims of accidents, foreigners, travelers, all sorts of swindlers, and deserters.

The messages did not deal only with individual cases. At times, the journals printed lists of persons: those lost, those fallen in battle, heirs, recipients of honors, or names from arrest warrants.

The official journals of the former Kingdom of Poland are a non-standard source for genealogical research for those who are not content with family trees strewn with dates like dry leaves. There are more and more genealogists compiling family histories in a complex way, on a historical basis. They hunt for all sorts of “morsels” to deepen the biographies of their ancestors and bring their figures to life.

There are many copies of official journals available online at, among other places, the websites of the Świętokrzyska Biblioteka Cyfrowa [Digital Library], the Radom Biblioteka Cyfrowa, the Podlaska Biblioteka Cyfrowa, and so on. A search for the term “dziennik urzędowy” will usually produce results, some of which are official journals of other sorts; or you can refine the search by specifying “dziennik urzędowy gubernii.”
