

From Vows to Verdict: Engagements, Weddings, Marriage Contracts, and Divorces in 19th Century Germany

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The following main topics will be presented:

- Marriage in 19th Century Germany
- Pre-Wedding Traditions and Customs
- Wedding Day Traditions
- Death and Remarriage
- Divorce Processes in 19th Century Germany

Marriage in 19th Century Germany

Reasons for Marriage:

- **Economic Stability:** Marriages were often arranged to ensure financial security.
- **Social Alliances:** Families used marriages to form strategic alliances.
- **Romantic Love:** Rarely a primary motivator during this period.

Legal and Religious Requirements:

- Permissions required from parents respectively guardians, sometimes even town officials, clergy, and in some cases, employers.
- Age requirements:
 - Pre-1875: Women could marry at 16 with guardians' consent, men at 21.
 - Post 1875: Women at 16, men at 20.
- Freedom of Marriage Laws:
 - Introduced in 1868 (North German Confederation) and extended to most of Germany by 1871. This meant no marriage licenses were necessary anymore.



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- Were necessary to soften the strict marriage rules and allowing individual exceptions:
 - Age requirements.
 - Marriage without observing legal deadlines.
 - Marriages at home or interfaith marriages.
 - Bride or groom were not baptized.

Pre-Wedding Traditions and Customs

Engagement Rituals:

- Public proclamations at church on three consecutive Sundays.
- Legal agreements recorded in local records (e.g. in church or vital records)
- **Kranzgeld (Wreath-Money):** Compensation for broken engagements.

Pre-Wedding Celebrations and Unique Customs:

- **Aussteuer (Dowry):** Provided financial stability for the couple.
- **Polterabend:** A festive gathering where dishes were broken for good luck.
- **Wreath-Making:** Friends of the bride prepared a myrtle wreath symbolizing virginity and vitality.

Wedding Day Traditions

Symbolic Practices:

- Brides' attire often included symbolic elements, such as wreaths or specific colors.
- **Unter die Haube kommen (Getting under the Bonnet):** A colloquial term for marriage.
- Ceremonies emphasized community involvement and the couple's new roles in society.
- Most Brides wore black dresses until the mid-1800s.



Death and Remarriage

Legal Implications:

- **Inheritance Protection:** Widows and widowers often faced legal challenges to secure inheritance rights for children.
- **Trauerjahr (Year of Mourning):**
 - Widows could not remarry within 12 months unless they proved they were not pregnant.
 - Widowers had no such restrictions and could remarry immediately.

Divorce Processes in 19th Century Germany

Legal Framework:

- Divorce was rare and involved multiple agencies, including clergy, local officials, and courts.
- Strict criteria determined eligibility for divorce, such as adultery or desertion.

Procedure:

1. Initial discussions with officials.
2. Approval from government authorities.
3. Finalization through court (or governmental) rulings.

Genealogical Insights

Why This Matters:

- Marriage contracts and divorce records provide unique insights into ancestors' lives.
- Beyond church and vital records, these documents reveal:
 - Social status
 - Economic conditions
 - Family dynamics and conflicts; and sometimes even character traits





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Research Tips:

- Look for engagement records, marriage contracts and divorce files in:
 - State Archives as well as Municipal (City or District) Archives.
 - Vital and church records.
 - But also announcements in local newspapers or gazetteers.

Sources and Additional Resources

- **Church Archives:** For engagement and marriage records.
- **State Archives:** For legal documents like marriage licenses, marriage contracts and divorce files.



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