

Frederick II (“the Great”), Memorandum to the Administration of Electoral Brandenburg on the Landlord-Peasant Relationship (1755)

Abstract

Here, Frederick addresses reports that noble landlords had been enclosing vacated village farms in their own estate lands. Such destruction of peasant fullholdings (later termed *Bauernlegen*) worked against the royal interest in collecting direct taxes from the nobility’s subject farmers and in recruiting soldiers from among their sons. Apart from prohibiting these enclosures, Frederick aimed to improve the subject farmers’ tenures and terms of seigneurial rent, replacing legally unlimited labor services with contractually specified obligations (of lesser extent). He sought to convert personal serfdom (where it existed) into personally free subject status and to supply all subject farmers’ holdings with judicially ratified contracts of tenure and rent [*Hofbriefe*] in place of unwritten, customary arrangements (which aggressive landlords were tempted to sharpen). Frederick’s success in these endeavors was real but limited. Landlord-village judicial strife rose steadily during and after his reign, due in part to his administration’s judicial reforms, which facilitated suits filed by village communities before the royal appellate court.

Source

Remedy of abuses which have taken place in respect of conversion of peasant holdings; oppression of unfree subjects.

Whereas most humble reports and representations have reached His Royal Majesty that the Directorate of new establishments and enterprises in the Prignitz was, under Pfeiffer, conducted in such bad and conscienceless fashion, and so confusedly that:

1. Sundry nobles laid hands on many peasant holdings and messuages under the pretext of establishing new enterprises and converted them into demesne farms, sometimes settling small men of mean estate on them, most of whom, being treated and regarded as serfs, and no proper contracts of succession having been made with them, soon ran away;

In connection with this abuse His Majesty has further been informed that:

2. The greater part of the nobles in the Prignitz have neither any regular system nor fixed rules for the dues and services obligatory on the peasant and subject, so that the latter are pressed and squeezed dry. And finally,

3. That various of the Privy Councillors of the Prignitz have departed very far from their duties and obligations, so that instead of regarding the best welfare of the land and the maintenance of the subjects and the equal allocation of their burdens, they have simply worked for the destruction of the land, robbed the subjects in various ways, and freed their own properties from all haulage duties and saddled others, even subjects of the Crown Agency, with them,

His Royal Majesty therefore feels obliged to inform the Chamber of Kurmark of all these things and at the same time to reprimand them most sharply and severely for not having – as their oath and their duty required – kept a closer eye on these practices, which are so detrimental to the land and contrary to His

Royal Majesty's paternal intentions, and either themselves remedied the same or reported them properly to His Majesty, the result of which, and of the fact that the said Chamber has, in particular, not paid better attention to the new establishments, is that His confidence in the said Chamber has been greatly weakened, and He is obliged to signify to them His extreme displeasure.

In order, then, to remedy these abuses, which are so detrimental to the land and its inhabitants, and to put all things back on a proper footing, His Royal Majesty hereby makes known His most solemn will and command that, seeing that edicts exist that no nobles shall convert any peasant holdings into demesne land, still less, turn them into home farms, and that the introduction of small day laborers and farmhands to replace the peasants is insufficient, and also forbidden, and further, that His Royal Majesty has many times told the Chamber, in connection with the new establishments, that no man shall be done violence and wrong thereby, and that the Chamber must see to this, the said Chamber shall now enact, and diligently enforce, that the peasant holdings converted by nobles to demesne farms shall be resettled in their entirety with peasants, and these shall not be taken as serfs, but proper contracts of succession – under no circumstances limited to one or a period of years – shall be concluded for the tenure of the holdings and messuages. The Chamber shall, under pain of the highest Royal displeasure, not only do this, but shall keep a watchful eye on it, continuously.

As to point 2, that the great majority of the nobles in the Prignitz, or at least very many of them, have no system of fixed rules for the dues and services to which the peasants are bound: His Royal Majesty wishes this point to be settled and determined once and for all, in such fashion that regular rules shall be drawn up and the nobles be told what services and dues they are entitled to receive in the future from their peasants and subjects, which rules shall be based on what is customarily accepted in the locality as equitable and tolerable, and, if no regular customary law exists, what is the law and custom in the circles neighboring to the Prignitz shall be adopted. Nor can the said nobles defend themselves by appealing to a historic right to levy dues from their peasants and subjects at their pleasure, for here the general welfare must simply be put ahead of private interests, and while His Royal Majesty is glad to protect His nobles in their rights, He will not allow the subjects to be oppressed and sucked dry thereby.

Finally, as regards point 3, regarding those Provincial Councillors who have grossly neglected their duties, as has been said of many of them: it would be most detrimental to the service of His Majesty and to the subjects if such persons were allowed to retain their offices further. The Chamber shall therefore, after a short, quite summary investigation, remove and cashier all such persons and replace them by others who are worthy and honorable.

Potsdam, November 1, 1755

Frederick

Source: C.A. Macartney, ed., *The Habsburg and Hohenzollern Dynasties in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, in *Documentary History of Western Civilization*. New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1970, pp. 348-50. Introduction, editorial notes, chronology, translations by the editor; and compilation copyright © 1970 by C.A. Macartney. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

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