

Frederick William I (“the Soldier King”), Instructions on the Formation and Functioning of the General Directory (December 20, 1722)

Abstract

This revealing document announced Frederick William’s decision to merge the hitherto multi-branched Prussian bureaucracy, divided especially between military and financial authorities, into a kind of central cabinet, the General Directory, in which substantive functions, such as responsibility for the army, were paired with oversight of one or another of the monarchy’s provinces. The document outlined the religious, social, and geographical criteria according to which membership in the General Directory would be determined, as well as the collegial processes (and inner-bureaucratic espionage) by which the king hoped to control ambitious ministers and prevent the concealment of important intelligence. The document spelled out the procedures by which the king hoped to avert opposition to the state among his subjects, whether from dissident nobles or the “unfree population” [*Unterthanen*]. The latter term may have referred to the limited number of east-Elbian villagers who were bound by personal serfdom, though it also may have referred, more generally, to subject villagers, who were not free to depart their residences without the consent of their seigneurial overlords’ manorial courts, though when stipulated conditions were met (as was not impossible in practice) this consent could not legally be denied.

Source

Art. I. On the employees of the General Directory, also the Provincial Commissariats and Chambers and the instructions for them.

1. Since We have become convinced of the supreme necessity of making changes in respect of Our present Commissariat General of War and General Directory of Finance, and of winding up and abolishing entirely both these offices and establishing in their place a Supreme General Directory of Finance, War, and Crown Properties, and of entrusting to that body most graciously the conduct of all business hitherto dealt with by the former Commissariat General of War and General Directory of Finance, We hereby declare that We propose Ourselves to assume the Presidency of the said General Directory, in order to give it more prestige, authority and weight and at the same time to demonstrate the special and most particular attention which We propose to devote, unremittingly and untiringly, to the affairs falling within the competence of the said Directory, conformably with their extreme importance.

[...]

[*Para. 2 lists the names of the persons appointed to the Directory: five “Vice-Presidents and Directing Ministers” (Lieutenant General von Grumbkow and Real Ministers of State von Creutz, von Krautt, von Katsch and von Görne), and fourteen councillors or assessors.*]

3. Even as We now show hereby that We repose special gracious confidence in the said Ministers and Assessors appointed by Us to the General Directory, so We also lay down that the five Directing Ministers [*the names follow*] [...] shall be responsible to Us for all proceedings whatever of the General Directory.

4. The Privy Councillors of Finance, War, and Crown Properties are, on the other hand, responsible only for what belongs to the Department to which each of them is appointed. [...]

[Para. 5 deals with questions of precedence. In general, members of the Directory take precedence immediately below Privy Councillors.]

6. When vacancies occur in the staff of the Directory, the five Ministers are to propose candidates to fill them.

7. But they must be men as able as can be found in the length and breadth of the country, of Evangelical-Reformed or Lutheran religion, loyal and honest, with open minds, who understand agriculture and have themselves practiced it, are well informed on commerce, manufacture and kindred subjects and also able to express themselves on paper, and, above all, must have been born Our subjects, although, as regards the last point, if someone were proposed who was a foreigner but very able, we might allow one or two such persons admission to Our Directory. But to put the above and other necessary qualities in a nutshell, they must be men capable of carrying out any duty entrusted to them.

[...]

[Paras. 8 and 9 list the qualifications required of presidents and councillors of the provincial commissariats and chambers.]

10. Employees of the Provincial Chambers must be good agriculturalists, who have themselves been farmers and local agents and themselves substantial leaseholders, also capable of expressing themselves on paper and of keeping accounts, wide-awake and sound men.

11. Further, the following system shall be followed in the making of new appointments to fill vacancies occurring in the Provincial Commissariats and Chambers. When a vacancy occurs in Prussia, the persons proposed to Us by the General Directory to fill it shall be natives of Cleves, the Mark, or Pomerania, but not Prussians.

In the Commissariats and Chambers of Cleves, natives of Prussia, the Mark, or Magdeburg, but not of Cleves.

In Pomerania, Prussians or natives of Cleves or Magdeburg, but not Pomeranians.

In Magdeburg and Halberstadt, natives of the Mark, Cleves, or Prussia, but not of Magdeburg or Halberstadt.

In a word, Our most gracious intention is that no person shall be proposed for a vacancy in a Provincial Commissariat or Chamber who is a native of the Province in which the vacancy occurs.

[...]

15. For all excisemen, inspectors of mills, police patrols, messengers, and other similar services, We wish no one to be employed except disabled ex-N.C.O.'s and soldiers, whose names must always be put forward by Our Adjutant General for Our most gracious approval.

[...]

17. We also most graciously command the General Directory to examine carefully and closely whether some retrenchments cannot be made in the Commissariats and Chambers where there are many employees, and whether other services cannot be combined, and the cost of their maintenance thus reduced. For example, in towns where customs are levied, the excisemen can at the same time receive the customs, and the salaries of the customs officers be saved.

If the Directory sets itself to look into this point with due regard for Our service and interests, it will

render Us considerable service, profit, and savings. [...]

19. Instructions to the Provincial Commissariats must in particular lay down that the Provincial Presidents are to visit the towns under their charge frequently, and inform themselves exactly of their conditions in respect of their trade and traffic, commerce and manufactures, the citizens and inhabitants and their conditions of living and employment, so as to become as closely acquainted with the towns in their Departments as a Captain in Our army must—as We insist—know his company; he must be exactly acquainted with the morale, intelligence, and physical qualities of every soldier belonging to it. [...]

Art. II.

[...]

7. The drafts of all communications sent out from the General Directory, judicial matters alone excepted, are revised by all five Directing Ministers.

8. The originals are to be countersigned simultaneously by Our Lieutenant General and Real Minister of State von Grumbkow and by Councillor von Creutz.

9. Should one of these two Ministers be absent, the countersignature shall be given in his place by von Krautt, and so on, the countersignature being in every case appended by the two senior Ministers present.

10. Councillor von Katsch revises and countersigns judicial papers alone.

11. The Directory shall meet every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday at the place designated by Us, and all business coming before the Directory shall be transacted by it in joint session and not, as hitherto, by its members in their own homes.

12. Mondays are the departmental days of Lieutenant General, etc., von Grumbkow. On them all matters relating to Prussia, eastern and western Pomerania, and the Neumark shall be considered, also frontier questions and matters relating to clearance and drainage of swamps shall be submitted and decided, but no others, even if urgent, because three, four, or eight days make no difference to Commissariat and Chamber business.

13. Wednesdays are the departmental days of the Real Minister of State and Councillor von Creutz. On them reports will be made and decisions taken on the affairs of Minden, Ravensberg, Tecklenburg and Ling and on questions of audit and forage, but no other.

14. Thursdays are the days of Real Minister of State and Councillor von Krautt. On them the affairs of the Kurmark, Magdeburg, and Halberstadt are to be treated, also matters concerning movements and supply of Our army, but no other.

15. On Fridays Our Real Minister of State and Councillor von Görne has his departmental days. On them matters will be debated which concern Guelder, Cleves, Meurs, Neuchâtel, the Orange Succession, the postal services, and the currency, but none other.

16. Judicial questions have no special departmental day, but shall be reported and settled on the day set for the Province in which the question originated.

17. The Directory shall meet at 7 A.M. in summer and 8 A.M. in winter.

18. It is not to break up until every question in the Department whose day it is has been settled down to the last small detail.

19. If members can deal with the business in an hour, they are free to disperse, but if they cannot finish in the morning, they must continue to sit without a break until 6 P.M. or until they have finished all the business. We therefore instruct Our Head Marshal and Real Privy Minister of State von Printz that if the Directory remains in session till after 2 P.M. he is to have a midday meal of four good courses, with wine and beer, brought up from Our kitchen. Half the heads and members of Departments are to eat while the other half work, and afterward those who worked while the others ate shall eat in their turn, and the others work, that Our service may be carried on efficiently, diligently, and truly.

[...]

Art. IV.

[...]

2. The Directory must watch with all diligence that the regiments of Our army always receive their pay punctually and in full, and that there are never any arrears.

[...]

Art. VII. On maintaining the welfare of the unfree population.

1. Everyone knows how important it is to every Power that the condition of its unfree population should be satisfactory and what dangerous consequences can ensue when the unfree population is exhausted by a bad economic system and excessive burdens, and is reduced to a state in which its members are unable to fulfill their ordinary obligations toward their master at all, or at any rate, not completely. The Directory is therefore to devote its attention, with great diligence and application, to maintaining the welfare of all Our unfree populations, so that they be always maintained in a flourishing and prosperous state, and that neither the war tax nor the landlords' dues, etc., be fixed at an unsupportable level.

2. The Directory must not confine itself to keeping the towns in a flourishing condition but must also pay special attention to the conditions of the peasants, the villagers, and the rural districts.

[...]

Art. VIII. On the war tax (contributio).

1. The Contribution is a matter of the utmost importance, to which the General Directory must devote tireless application and pains, and on this point both the entire said Directory and all Ministers belonging to it, and also the members of every Department, but as regards the latter, only so far as it falls within their competence, and not where they are not competent, are to be individually responsible.

2. The General Directory is to pay especial attention to seeing that the Contributions are paid punctually and in full, and that there are no deficits.

[...]

4. In particular, the General Directory is to take good care that Our immediate subjects are not unduly burdened in respect of taxes and billeting, since in many places they are unfairly burdened in both respects by comparison with the mediate subjects, and the said Directory must investigate this point exactly and immediately make any changes and reforms which are found necessary.

5. The taxation due from Our immediate subjects is to be collected by the agents and paid into the Provincial Circle account, which will then pay it into the war chest, so that the peasant is not harassed twice and delays are avoided.

[...]

X. The excise.

1. In respect of the excise, one of the points to which the General Directory must pay the greatest attention is that the tariffs must be well and accurately fixed, and under them all foreign woolen and other goods must be subjected to heavy duties, in such fashion that Our own native products and manufactures can be cheaper and sell better than foreign ones.

[...]

7. No man in Our Kingdom, Provinces, and Lands shall be exempt from the excise, and for the further prevention of all evasion We Ourselves and Our Royal House will pay the excise, and great care shall be taken that no one shall in future presume to defraud the excise under the pretext that these or those commodities or goods are destined for Us or Our Royal House.

[...]

11. The General Directory must also use every means to prevent persons domiciled in Our Lands from transferring their money or capital abroad. And the said Directory will have to consider, in full session and maturely, how this may best be prevented, and how capitalists may be given the opportunity to place and invest their money in Our Lands.

[...]

XII. Manufactures.

1. The General Directory is already aware of the importance to Us and Our Lands of the establishment of good and well-organized manufactures, and must therefore take all pains to ensure that all kinds of manufactures of woolens, iron, wood, and leather, and the craftsmen for them which are not yet established in Our Lands be, as far as possible, introduced into them.

2. In order to achieve this most useful objective, the General Directory must import the necessary manufactures, according to the methods adopted by Us for the musket factory in Potsdam. [...]

XIV. On arresting deserters.

1. In order that desertion from Our army be checked and deserters more easily apprehended, the General Directory shall issue and publish, as from Us and in Our name, in Our Kingdom and also in all Provinces and Lands, a severe Edict, which shall afterwards be read out on the first Sunday of each month in towns in which there are no fortresses, and similarly in all villages with churches, to the effect that burghers and peasants shall not allow any soldier, N.C.O., grenadier, musketeer, cavalryman, or dragoon, man on furlough, or orderly who cannot show a regular pass to pass through any town or village, but shall immediately arrest him and hand him over to the nearest regiment, which shall then send the deserter on to his own regiment, which will then defray the expenditure incurred.

If a soldier deserts from a regiment or company and the officer announces this in the town or country district, the burghers and peasants shall immediately sound the alert, ring the alarm bells, occupy the exits, and institute further search for the deserter.

When they apprehend him the nearest excise office shall pay the peasants, burghers, or agents who have caught and handed in the deserter the sum of twelve thalers, which Councillor Schöning is to deduct from the money paid to the regiment.

[...]

A person helping a deserter to escape has earned the gallows and shall, as soon as he is convicted of the crime, be hanged, without waiting for Our confirmation.

[...]

XVIII. Leasing of agents' leaseholdings, demesne farms, and other Crown properties.

1. The General Directory shall work with tireless diligence, fidelity and application, and shall always keep in mind that Our Crown estates and leaseholdings are to be improved and set in better order every year, and, where new demesne farms can with advantage be established, or new dairy farms, or where wild and uncultivated fens can be cleared and drained, they are to set about the work at once, without fail, and in every way to see how, through industry and expertise, the yields of Our Crown properties can be increased without equal or greater loss to Our war or other revenues. If, for example, the Commissariat for Crown Properties improved the "Amt" of Potsdam by 400 Reichsthaler a year, and this brought Us a corresponding loss of 400 thalers on the Potsdam excise, this would be no real improvement.

[...]

3. The General Directory is to apply these principles in all improvements and to act at once where We find a real advantage, no matter into which of the accounts the surplus goes, so long as We get real advantage out of it.

[...]

29. The Directory will be able to see from the above instructions as clearly as man could desire that it is Our will that reports and queries submitted to Us from the said Directory shall and must always be in such form that We can rely on them confidently and without misgivings, and be satisfied that everything contained in the reports corresponds exactly to the facts and has been previously well examined and thrashed out. And as We shall be dependent on the Directory, if it should report any matter to us erroneously, it follows that it must keep many spies in the Provinces to guide it aright.

Nor is it admissible that the General Directory should try to put the blame on the Provincial Commissariats and Chambers by saying that they reported so and so and the Directory trusted them and consequently submitted the matter to Us as it was reported to them.

We shall not accept such excuses nor recognize them as valid. The General Directory must personally inform itself of the matter and examine it in full, to see whether the reports from the Provinces are not partial and whether human considerations and intrigues, etc., have not colored them, for under these instructions Our said Directory must be collectively responsible, each for all and all for each, in such and all other cases. [...]

Art. XXXIV

[...]

2. We have already (above) ordered that the Directory shall correspond diligently with the Commissariats and Chambers, and the members of each Department with the private informants and spies to be organized in the Provinces, in order that they may be informed in minutest detail of what goes on in the Provinces, either in the Commissariat, Crown Property, financial, Provincial, or political fields; also new journals and all sorts of particulars of Provincial events. For example: in Prussia a good winter and heavy frost. Big quantities of provisions, etc., being brought into the towns. Large supplies of timber for the new

constructions are coming in from the forests. The construction is going on well. A good harvest is anticipated. Commerce, shipping, and manufactures are looking up. Were Your Royal Majesty to come here, you would—we hope—deign to be satisfied with the way things are progressing.

This or that town or village has been burnt down. There is a secret movement among the nobles to get rid of the general tax on holdings, strong resistance to this or that edict. This or that nobleman is objecting to the land tax. This or that regiment is buying fodder from neighboring foreign countries. The Chamber will pay its quarterly dues in full, or it will fail to do so, but will be able to give reasons so valid that H.M. will, under the instructions, be obliged to accept them; or, it will be necessary to put strong pressure on the Chamber, to force it to pay. The Chamber works very diligently, as does the Commissariat. The Royal Edicts and the substance of the instructions are carried out, or not. Twenty new houses are being built in this or that town. The attendance in the Commissariats and Chambers is regular, or not. This or that regiment has carried out forced requisitions. The Commissariat has asked the officer commanding the regiment to pay compensation for such requisitions, without effect, etc.; also, in general, any new developments.

As now the General Directory has been instructed by Us to summarize all such and similar information reaching it from the Provinces in a short report and to submit such report to Us weekly, so it is also permitted, should any matter be contained therein on which it regards it necessary to ask for Our gracious opinion and command, to request the same from Us.

3. The questions must, however, be framed as shortly and clearly as possible, concisely and to the point, and accompanied by the Directory's own recommendation and the reasons on which this is based.

4. A quite short extract must be made on the same day from the record of all discussions and decisions in the General Directory and sent to Us in the evening, so that We can see and read it the next morning and can also deliver Our most gracious decision if there are any questions in it. [...]

In every case, the Directory's own recommendation must be added, with the reasons on which it is based; We remain King and Lord, and can do as We please.

If, however, they submit their recommendation with the question, firstly, We know that they have examined the question thoroughly before reporting; secondly, We are convinced that if the question has been examined by so many honest and capable men, We can never be cheated; and thirdly, We profit from the fact that they must be responsible to Us for their recommendation that they have represented the matter as it is and not otherwise, and also cannot answer to Us otherwise than to the best of their knowledge and consciences. [...]

Source of English translation: 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. 299-309. 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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