

Introduction of the Brandenburg-Prussian Canton System of Military Recruitment [Kantonreglement], issued by Frederick William I (“the Soldier King”), as an Order to General Field Marshal Albrecht Konrad Finck von Finckenstein (May 1, 1733)

Abstract

To avoid the high cost of foreign mercenaries, and to minimize desertions, the Prussian king decreed that the physically robust (and tall) sons of the Prussian common people, especially villagers, were to be recruited into his regiments. To this end, he divided his lands into recruitment districts or cantons. Recruited soldiers served relatively short terms of active peacetime duty, and otherwise pursued their livelihoods, except during off-season annual maneuvers. This practice anticipated Prussia’s nineteenth-century adoption of universal military service, followed by active and inactive reserve duties.

Source

My dear General Count von Finckenstein,

Because heretofore there has been so much disorder and no fairness [*égalité*] regarding the recruits that the regiments have, and because one regiment has recruited more than it can use, and some regiments have too few; so I have found it good for the conservation of the army and have resolved to make a proper disposition of what locales and hearths each regiment should have for recruiting. Therefore I am sending you the disposition of the hearths that your regiment receives, totaling 7,790, so that if it is divided into ten parts then it will be roughly 700 and several tens of hearths for each company. The guards company can pick one part, and the remaining companies can play [*spielen*] for the other nine parts.

The other regiments should make no claim to any of the recruits that your regiment receives through this disposition, except those men who during maneuvers really were in the rank-and-file, and the old soldiers who really have served five years in a regiment as soldiers and have been discharged, they should stay with the regiments who had them. All of the other passes, which have previously been issued, are hereby declared null and void. Rather, all new recruits of your regiment should be provided with new passes and all should take the oath of loyalty, that they are obligated to His Royal Majesty and the regiment and the company where they are placed.

The new hearths that each company receives are there so that they keep themselves full-strength and grow by taking the best of the young men. They must take as many laborers/peasants [*Knechte*] as they are to have according to the regulations when the regiment takes the field. They should also take as many men as they must give up to the new garrisons, for which they should use their old discharged peasants and then make up the shortage from the countryside.

Each and every one of the new recruits should be given a small crest around his hat, from the old crests that the regiment gives up when they receive new hats. All these recruits should be provided not only with new passes from the captains of each company, according to which canton they are given, but they should also swear to the king, the regiment, and the company where they are placed.

You should also, as the commander of the regiment, diligently keep a roll of the recruits of each company, how many and what kind they are, who have left the country and have remained hidden [*conniviret*] because of the recruiting. You must try to get them again, because I do not want any to slip through or any to hide so that others have too heavy a burden.

Those who reside in this district and canton and have not grown [tall] should not be recruited at all. No one who has a house and farm should be recruited, or you will suffer my most serious displeasure and the loss of your honor and reputation.

The cities specified in the enclosed document are not granted to your regiment in the disposition; therefore you and the commander of the regiment can distribute such among the companies which have received the worst cantons.

Enclosed you are also receiving the patent circular order, which I am issuing to the priests of the district assigned to your regiment. You should instruct such preachers to announce this order from the pulpits, and also [give] each preacher the names of the locales of his congregation that are assigned to your regiment for recruiting, so that while reading my edict he can read off such locales at the same time.

I do not doubt that you and the commander of the regiment will endeavor yourselves hereby to maintain the regiment in good condition and to institute this beneficial system well, justly, and impartially, and this order should be executed beginning on the 1st of May. I am

Your wholly affectionate king,

F. Wilhelm

Potsdam, the 1st of May 1733

To the Regiment von Finckenstein

Source: Eugen von Frauenholz, *Das Heerwesen in der Zeit des Absolutismus*. Munich: Beck, 1940. (Entwicklungsgeschichte des deutschen Heerwesens. Unter Mitw. von Walter Elze und Paul Schmitthenner hrsg. von Eugen von Frauenholz. Bd. 4.), pp. 243-45.

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