

Prussian “Soldier King” Frederick William I Instructs his Officials on Peasant Colonization in East Prussia (July 2, 1718)

Abstract

Mercantilism advocated measures to increase the human population, which the Prussian kings enthusiastically termed *Peuplierung*. By the time Frederick William issued these instructions on peasant colonization in East Prussia, a distant province surrounded by Polish and Polish-Lithuanian territory, this land had already suffered heavy population losses in Germany’s last serious incidence of plague (1709-1713), had been beset by accompanying harvest crises, and had suffered under nearby Polish-Swedish-Russian warfare. The province’s eastern region, referred to here as “Lithuania” (in part because of its small indigenous Lithuanian-speaking population), largely consisted of crown lands, on which Frederick William decided to settle peasant colonists (rather than leasing them out as large-scale demesne farms worked by subject farmers). The terms proposed by the king were liberal for their day and were accepted by many pioneer families. Altogether, over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Prussian government successfully promoted the settlement of hundreds of thousands of foreign colonists on hitherto devastated or unsettled lands, many of which, especially under Frederick II, were reclaimed from river wetlands.

Source

Cabinet Order by King Frederick William I on the Cameral and Crown Properties and Land Settlement in Lithuania (1718)

We have received the report of the Commission appointed by Us on the condition of Our Cameral organization in Lithuania. And whereas We have most graciously determined to place the same on a sounder footing, and We also recognize that the Chamber cannot possibly be brought into proper order unless the local land offices [*Aemter*] are put in better order and good agents [*Beamte*] appointed, We do enact:

1. That, in order that Our peasant subjects may be led toward God and thus achieve blessings and prosperity, schoolmasters shall be appointed in all considerable villages, and each one shall be given for his maintenance a half hide from Our unoccupied farms, free of rent, land tax [*contributio*] or billeting duty. We have also written to Our Samogitian Consistory to make the necessary further arrangements, and have also instructed Our Court Preacher, Dr. Lypsius, and Master Franke in Halle to find the necessary personnel, toward which you and all serving under you are to contribute, in order that Our most gracious purpose may be realized.
2. Further: since it is indispensably necessary for the realization of Our purpose in this and other respects that efficient agents shall be appointed to the local offices, who are good farmers and experienced in accountancy, We wish that they shall receive adequate salaries, and therefore graciously command you to send in a schedule of the salary each should be paid, proportionate to the size of his district and the work involved, and then, on receipt of Our further instructions, to seek out and enlist good, experienced, efficient and upright officials, and We will also send such men to you from Pomerania and the rest of Our Province of Kurmark and Neumark.
3. And although it is not in principle advisable that either members of the Cameral staff or local agents

should rent farms from the Crown, yet under the exceptional circumstances We authorize your Department to permit this practice, if thereby you secure good officials; but this is only a temporary provision, and We will go into the question further when the shortage of manpower has been made up.

4. And since We do not find it consonant with Our interests to allow many new demesne farms to be established, in default of tenant farmers or for other reasons, since those established to date, as hitherto administered, and not leased, are not nearly repaying the capital invested in them and are consequently of little profit, it is Our will not to go beyond those already established and in operation; and We are totally resolved, instead of demesne farms, to have the deserted villages rebuilt and repopulated, to which end you and the agents are to devote every effort and care to repopulating the country – building up one village after another, not beginning all of them at once. Each peasant in the new villages is to be given two hides of land, and for livestock, since We have observed that with the livestock hitherto allocated to them the peasants cannot farm their holdings properly nor plow their arable land as it should be done, he is to be given four horses and four oxen, besides the other stock, all to be given him at once on his entry into possession. Colonists of the same origin are to be brought together as far as possible, and, when the annual report is rendered, it shall state clearly how many villages you propose to construct in the year, how many farms they are to contain, how they are situated, and how much money will be needed for the purpose. We shall then take the necessary action and arrange for the money to be budgeted.

5. We further wish to have this, Our most gracious purpose, proclaimed by Patent, of which you are to prepare a draft, stating clearly what each settler is to receive and what he will have to pay in the future. You will submit this for Our most gracious approval. The new settlers must, as already stated, be given all stock punctually and complete, and also given stock books with accurate inventories, the winter crops sown and the fields ready for the summer crops, and, generally, they must receive very good and friendly treatment, to prevent them from becoming discontented at the outset, and to that end, none of the new settlers is to arrive before the spring, for so We save their keep for six months and they also find pasturage for their livestock at once. This is to be stated in the Patent. On the expiration of a year, then, you are to report fully to Us, and Our future enquiries will be based on the facts as stated in your reports.

6. You are to see that the agents are attentive to their duties, and carry through the settlement of the peasants as speedily as possible, but you must never treat them otherwise than fairly, nor differently from how they are treated by other Chambers. If one of them is slack, he should be fined or, if the circumstances require it, and after report to Me, dismissed, and another put in his place.

7. And whereas the colonists so far established have, owing to a series of misfortunes, fallen into difficulties and the “free years” they have been granted can be little or no help to them, We are not disinclined graciously to remit what they owe at present and are unable to pay without ruin, if this is sufficiently attested by the priests, village mayors, Captains, and agents and also, for a few years, to allow you to accept half rents from those in real distress, again if this is sufficiently well attested, but you must first send in an exact calculation of how much this will cost; We shall then decide.

8. And although We do not doubt that so much grace will attract new men to Lithuania and also deter persons already there from emigrating to Poland, where they are, We hear, being promised extensive liberties, yet it is absolutely indispensable that the agents, while they must be instructed to supervise the peasants’ work closely and see that they deliver what is due from them, without shortage, must yet be most expressly enjoined not to treat the newly arrived settlers roughly in any way, and especially not to harry them at once – as they have been doing – by ruthless executions, which only cost a lot in fees and thereby impoverish the peasants, but first to let them strike their roots, and keep them under control and alive to their obligations in kindly fashion, by unhostile supervision and regular visits and, if all else fails, to follow no other procedure than that of official restraint. You must order the agents, in Our name, to observe these instructions exactly, and you must set them a good example.

9. And whereas it has been reported to Us that Our peasant subjects are at present, under Our previous orders, required to pay for half the timber used by them, and We plainly see that as conditions now stand in Lithuania this will not always be practicable and will result in the peasants' letting their buildings fall into disrepair, We have graciously resolved that peasants of small means shall be given their timber altogether free of charge. But their houses are not, as hitherto, to be built of timber alone, but half-timbered; you are to take the necessary steps.

10. In respect of the outstanding sums still owed by agents and tenant farmers, which make up part of the debt of 145,000 thalers reported by you, you must first demand regular settlements, providing for this in the case of the tenant farmers in their leases; the whole of every liquid debt to be paid within six months, and accurate monthly statements are to be sent to Us of what has been paid and what is still outstanding.

11. And whereas, unless proper accounts are rendered, it is impossible to put the Cameral affairs straight and see how they stand, two Cameral accountants shall within the next six months go through all accounts not yet audited with the Master of the Chamber, but under the supervision of yourself, the President, and, in the presence of the Cameral Councillor from whose Department the account is taken, shall rectify them and see to it most strictly that in future the regulations governing the drawing up and despatch of accounts to the General Audit Chamber are punctually observed. The two accountants and the Master of the Chamber shall make this their principal business and not allow themselves to be diverted from it by any other task; for which purpose you, the President, are to choose the persons whom you judge fittest, and to speed up the work. We have most graciously resolved to appoint two new accountants and to give them the same salaries as the others, to which end either We shall send you two efficient men from Berlin, or if you know of any suitable persons, you may propose them.

12. In connection wherewith, the official accounts are not to be left, as hitherto, open, on account of the outstanding debts, but the said debts and sums are to be carried over from one account to the next; but must be claimed and called in as soon as possible.

13. We wish that the reliefs which have so often been permitted to tenants and promised in their leases shall so far as possible cease, and your duty is to see that in the future, when new leases are drawn up, the tenants are allowed no reliefs except in cases of general failures of the harvest and for the stock, of general cattle mortality, but in other cases of cattle mortality only against wastage, as is customary in the Kurmark and elsewhere. To facilitate this We graciously consent, in respect of wastage of sheep, that whereas a sheep was previously valued at 24 Polish groschen after deduction of expenses, in future it shall be valued at only 21 Polish groschen, the reliefs being abolished, and We trust you to make every effort to get this set on a correct footing.

14. As moreover the achievement of the necessary exactness in the agents' offices is greatly facilitated if the Captains and administrators also pay attention to the economy, We have written to this effect to Our Prussian Government, as per the enclosed copy.

15. Although We should in general like to see the taxation put on the footing of the Mark, as We have ordered Our German Chamber, yet We think that at present this would not be advisable in Lithuania; it would, in particular, probably frighten away the tenant farmers by imposing on them a system unfamiliar to them. Things are therefore to remain as before, until further notice.

16. Nevertheless, in order that there should be some basis for taxation, the fields of the demesne farms are to be measured, where this has not already been done, and local sworn men are to be present at the sowing for three or four years in succession, according to the number of the fields, and to make an accurate register of all the different crops sown.

17. And as it would appear contrary to Our interests if the persons at the head of the Chamber turned out their horses to feed and graze on demesne farms not rented by them, you, the President and the Chamber, shall keep no horses on demesne farms not rented by you.

18. We also desire the repoplement of the land and the introduction of good cultivation to be carried forward with all imaginable diligence and care; it is your duty to submit to Us your respectful ideas on the subject.

Finally, We command you to obey all the above most strictly, and also to carry into execution without delay all agreements and undertakings conducted by you with Our Commission, as minuted. As We also expect periodical progress reports from you.

To the Lithuanian Chamber

Tilsit, July 2, 1718

Frederick William

C. B. v. Creutz

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. 292-98. Introduction, editorial notes, chronology, translations by the editor; and compilation copyright © 1970 by C.A. Macartney. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Source of original German text: Rudolph Stadelmann, *Friedrich Wilhelm I. in seiner Thätigkeit für die Landescultur Preussens*. Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1878, pp. 234-38.

Recommended Citation: Prussian "Soldier King" Frederick William I Instructs his Officials on Peasant Colonization in East Prussia (July 2, 1718), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/the-holy-roman-empire-1648-1815/ghdi:document-3603>> [April 30, 2025].