

“Police Minister” Johann Anton von Pergen Briefs Emperor Leopold II on “the Most Important Activities of the Secret Police” (March 2, 1790)

Abstract

In the 1790s, revolutionary France and Habsburg Austria pioneered, for differing purposes, the creation of modern, bureaucratized, and rationalized political police organs. The Austrian government felt itself menaced both by French-style anti-absolutists and potential insurrections among its non-German subjects, particularly the Hungarians. This excerpt from a text by one of the most influential statesmen in the Habsburg Empire at the time illustrates the mixture of motives – some longstanding and others new – that prevailed at the birth of a secret police network for which the Austria of Francis II/I (1792-1835) became notorious.

Source

The most important activities of the secret police are:

1. With assistance by the police reporting system, which is part of the regular police and serves as proof (of the necessity) of the connection between these two police institutions, to detect all persons suspicious or dangerous to the state, either seizing them, if their crime was perpetrated, with approval by the supreme authority, taking down the summary statement, and submitting the latter to Your Majesty for deciding whether those persons ought to be transferred straight to the criminal justice system or should be investigated by police in secret – or, on the other hand, if only a reasonable suspicion exists, to have the suspects observed by informants everywhere, thus forestalling their possible escape;
2. to observe the connections among the embassies and their friendly dealings with the public servants, reporting, without interruption, the observations made from day to day to Your Majesty after eight or 14 days;
3. to detect any discontent creeping in, negative attitudes or even germinating mutiny, nipping such manifestations in the bud wherever possible, and reporting them to Your Majesty. In the other kingdoms and provinces, too, the secret correspondence introduced between the police directors posted in the capitals there and the directorate general here provides the most appropriate opportunity for such revelation, thus being of even greater use, considering that this correspondence sometimes also contains reports to the police, which, occurring quite frequently in the present course of time, have an influence on foreign affairs and military orders;
4. if Your Majesty wishes to prepare the public for one or the other decree to be followed, the secret police, headed continuously by us through Police Director General, Hofrat von Beer, a man practically experienced in all aspects of this business, honest, and modest, has to bring this about unnoticed by secret means. Finally, however,
5. one of the most important responsibilities of the secret police, to expose, as far as possible, any harmful attempts against Your Majesty’s sacrosanct person and family, incessantly keeping watch over them. Additionally, *anno Domini* 1786, each governor of the crown territories was immediately sent by His Majesty the secret instruction enclosed here together with a report and accompanied by His

Majesty's handwritten letter and orders that this is to be disclosed to no one, no matter what that person may say, except to the police directors assigned to them. It was impossible to go any further in the provinces. In the royal seat here, however, the police have various highly important matters in process, about which I may only report to Your Majesty verbally. Since among all of these cases there are so many on which, due to their urgency, I feel obliged to seek Your Majesty's expression of will and orders, I must request in advance, as long as I am still capable of directing this extensive and delicate business as a minister of state, Your Majesty's privy hearing anytime and anywhere, just as was permitted to me most graciously by His Majesty the Emperor Joseph, so as to foster Your Majesty's highest service. And in conclusion I would only like to add that, since most persons offering their services as spies right here aim only at money-spinning without rendering real services, the secret police is also hindered by such people in the cases it processes and the best precautions are often entirely thwarted, Your Majesty deign to refer all of such individuals to me, or in my absence, to Hofrat and Police Director von Beer. For otherwise the service would have to suffer and Your Majesty would surely be deceived many times, such as happened recently to His Majesty the Emperor Joseph with a certain Lohner, about which I will report to Your Majesty in detail.

Source: August Fournier: "Kaiser Josef II. und der 'geheime Dienst'. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der österreichischen Polizei", in A. F.: *Historische Studien und Skizzen*. 3rd series. Vienna: F. Tempsky/ Leipzig: G. Freytag, 1912, pp. 5–7; reprinted in Walter Demel and Uwe Puschner, eds., *Von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Wiener Kongreß 1789-1815*, Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, ed. Rainer A. Müller, vol. 6. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1995, pp. 248–52.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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