

The Political Testament of Frederick William I (“the Soldier King”) (February 17, 1722)

Abstract

This hard-boiled statement of the earthy, shrewd, and domineering Frederick William’s views on his realm and how he aimed to govern it flowed from his pen when his son, the future Frederick the Great, was but ten years old. It was meant to be read upon its author’s death, which did not occur until eighteen years later. The Prussian king’s deep religiosity pervades the text, but so does his religious bigotry toward Catholics and Jews. Likewise, the text conveys his prejudices against the ruling elites, both in aristocratic East Prussia and in his westerly, more bourgeois provinces. His disinclination toward war and diplomatic adventures in favor of sustaining the productive interplay, as he saw it, of army and society reveal the sense in which he deserved his reputation as soldier-king. It is notable that this text offers no reflections on the state of the common people, whether village agriculturalists or town-dwelling artisans. The only subjects the king concerns himself with are his “vassals.”

Source

Instructions how my successor to the throne of Prussia is to shape his conduct, and the necessary information on the whole state of the army and Provinces. I have written this in Potsdam on January 22, 1722.

Since I clearly perceive that my health is growing worse year by year, and I know that by human expectation my life cannot last much longer, I have set down the following instructions that my dear successor may model his conduct on them.

I begin with a few words on my own life. I stand well with Almighty in God. From my twentieth year I have put all my trust steadfastly in God, Whose gracious hearing I have ever invoked, and He has also constantly heard my prayer, and I am assured of salvation through the grace of Jesus Christ and His bitter passion and death. I heartily repent all grievous and inner sins which I have committed and pray to God to forgive them for Jesus Christ’s sake. I have always labored to make myself better and to live a godly life so far as I was humanly able to do so, and with God’s help I will so persevere until my end. So help me the Holy Spirit,

through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Let my dear successor be well assured that all successful rulers who keep God before their eyes and have no mistresses or, rather, whores, and lead a godly life – on such rulers God will shower down all worldly and spiritual blessings. I therefore beseech my dear successor to lead a godly life and to show a good example to his lands and army, not to tittle and gorge, which lead to a dissolute life. Neither must my dear successor allow any comedies, operas, ballets, masks, or redoutes to be held in his Lands and Provinces, he must abhor them because these are godless and devilish things, whereby Satan, his temple, and kingdom are increased.

Therefore, we true Christians must destroy the temple of Satan. It is the duty of a God-fearing ruler – rather, your duty – to repress and not to tolerate the temple of Satan, that is, mistresses, operas, comedies, redoutes, ballets, and masques, and yourself to lead no such ungodly life, which has never been tolerated in our House, and from the day of John Sigismund no such sins have flourished in the

House of Brandenburg. Read the history of our House; you will find there that this is true, and for that reason, God has continually blessed our House. Be assured that the blessing that still rests most constantly on our House comes from our godly conduct. So I beseech my dear successor, keep no mistresses nor follow any other such scandalous pleasures, and do not allow such abominable sins to flourish in your Lands and Provinces, but punish them, and I enjoin you to follow my example, and beseech you, in considering the constitution of my land and army, to remember that I have always begun with God.

Do likewise. Do so, and God will certainly bless you and will not forsake you.

Beware of flatterers and toadies; those are your enemies who always agree with you, and they are capable of leading you astray into all sorts of mischief. You must not listen to them, but reject them flatly, for by their imperceptible flatteries they seduce you into many evil sins which can damage the well-being of your lands and army, for flatterers are your greatest enemies, but those who tell you the truth are your friends, and it is they who love you, be assured of that. [...]

[The writer now enters into certain budgetary details, recommending economy in the payment of all servants of the State, beginning with the ministers. Then:]

You must manage your finances personally and alone and order the command of the army personally and alone and dispose of the two main points alone; then you will have authority in the army through the command and the love of all your officers and civil employees, because you alone hold the purse strings, and you will be respected and admired by the whole world for a sage and good ruler – may Almighty God help you to it!

I beg my successor most earnestly to impose no cuts in the pay of the regimental commanders, junior officers, and rank and file, and to leave their commissariat as he will find it after my death. Insofar as you do that, I give my dear successor my blessing, that God may prosper him in all his enterprises and make him formidable, that God may bestow on him more blessings than He did on Solomon. But if you act otherwise and cut down the commissariat, I withdraw my fatherly blessing from you and call down on you the curse that God sent down on King Pharaoh, that it may go with you as it went with Absalom. [...]

[Next follows a list of Frederick William's regiments, their pay and the sources of it. This section ends:]

My dear successor, what will the world say of the increase in the army when you mount the throne? That you are a formidable Power in the face of your enemies, of whom our House has very many, and your friends will hold you to be a clever and sensible ruler; may Almighty God help you to be it, I wish it from my heart, Amen.

I must make my dear successor acquainted with all my Provinces, the Lands and their inhabitants.

Prussia is a very fine and big land and very fruitful. The people make good servants of the State for they are very intelligent, but my successor must keep his eye on them, for the nation is false and cunning. But with good words you can do what you will with them.

They understand nothing of accounts or economics, so you must not employ them in those departments.

But they make excellent employees in the army, in negotiations, and in the judicial services. The previous organization of my domains was unsuccessful, but this year I have taken it in hand seriously and begun building and improving. If this can be kept up for four or five years more, it is certain that the revenues from the domains will be at least doubled. May God bless and preserve Göhren, because he has a thorough understanding of how to organize and improve the domains. If he should die, my successor can find no better men than Privy Councillors Thile and Rocho.

As to the Contribution, my successor must not raise it, but leave it at the single land tax [*Generalhufenschoss*] and by no means reintroduce the old Provincial funds [*Landkasten*], for it cost me a great deal of trouble to get things as far as I have. For it is a big infringement of the privileges of the Province, which are very detrimental to the Prince's sovereignty, and the Prince used to depend on the nobles, and now everything depends on me, without argument; is that not better?

As to Königsberg, my successor must introduce the Berlin excise tariff. This country is lacking in small towns; my successor must establish new ones in Lithuania, and in the Prussian towns there are no manufactures, but manufactures are the true backbone of a land, and of the Prince of a land, so my successor must establish manufactures in Prussia and in all his other Provinces where there are none, especially manufactures of woollens; for that purpose my successor must forbid the importation of all foreign woollen goods into Prussia and all his Provinces under pain of confiscation of all the offender's assets, and if they come a second time, they must be jailed at hard labor forever. My successor must also keep to my edict that no raw wool shall be exported from any Province, under pain of forfeiture of life and limb, and my successor must protect the manufactures in all his Provinces, then you will see how your revenues will increase and your lands and subjects will flourish. God grant it! If you make the beginning, this will certainly be the result. As to the nobles, they had of old great privileges, which the Elector Frederick William broke down through his sovereign power, and I brought them to obedience in 1715 by the single land tax. If my successor wants to be ceremonially installed in Prussia he must tell Ilgen and Kniphausen secretly to arrange for you to receive the homage in Prussia quickly, so that no Polish magnates appear, and the homage is done in the same form as I received it, but if a Polish magnate is present that will have bad consequences. You will find out about this in the archives. Look up the installations of my father and grandfather, you will see how important it is, not just a ceremony. In Prussia there is also a powerful nobility; the Counts' Estate is the most considerable. My successor must keep a watchful eye on the families of Finck and Dohna or they will share the rule with my successor, and both families still cherish the old Prussian Polish privileges in their hearts, be assured of this. My successor must make it a policy, and direct his efforts thereto, that the nobles and Counts of all his Provinces, and especially Prussia, are employed in the army and their sons put into the cadet school; this gives strength to his service and army, and more tranquility in his lands. My successor must also grant only to very few of them permits to travel abroad, for first they must stand in your service. But if they are really in your service and you are not at war, you can allow a few to travel abroad. It is good that my dear successor should enjoy the advantage that the whole nobility is brought up in your service from youth up, and know no lord except God and the King of Prussia, but if my successor does not act so and takes heaps of foreigners into his service as senior officers he will not be served so well by the foreign officers, and his own vassals [s.c., holders of fiefs from the crown] will serve abroad, for as to those who serve abroad, be assured that they are all recalcitrants with little respect for their Prince. If all your officers are children of your own land, be assured that you will have in them a reliable army and good, reliable officers, and no potentate has better than that. You must be courteous and gracious in your behavior toward all nobles, from all Provinces, and sort out the good from the bad and distinguish the true among them, then you will be loved and feared.

As to West and East Pomerania, this is a good, fertile land. The domains are in better condition than in Prussia, and there is no derelict land, but they can be improved in many respects, and if you re-lease them and improve the economy, the Cameral revenue from the domains in Pomerania can be brought up to 50,000 to 70,000 thalers a year. My successor must employ Göhren, Thile, and Rocho on this and other similar economic tasks. The Pomeranian vassals are as true as gold, they kick up a bit of a row at times [*Resonniere[n] wohl bissweilen*], but if my successor says "this is how it is to be and you must make the best of it," none of them will move against your orders.

As to the New Mark, it is in all respects like Pomerania. There are many improvements to be made in the domains, but the vassals are always complaining, especially those from the Circle of Crossen, but you

must not take any notice of the Neumark complaints, for they are mostly groundless, but that is their national habit.

For the Middle and Uker Mark, the vassals are the loyalest of all and whatever you command them, they gladly and readily obey your orders. The domains in the whole Kurmark Chamber are in fairly good condition, but a revision, Amt by Amt, is most necessary, for it would be possible to effect a very big improvement, more than 100,000 thalers. For the forests, you must appoint a commission to go into their condition thoroughly, get rid of all abuses and arrange for a better sales service, so that the Dutch and Hamburg merchants pay better and higher prices than now for the timber. There is much to be done there, and a great deal of fraud is being practiced by the hunters. The vassals of the Altmark are bad, disobedient men who do nothing with a good grace but are obstinate and treat their sovereign right lightly. My successor must keep a very watchful eye on them and not be soft with them, for there are elements among them who take their duties altogether too lightly. When you issue any order, important or trivial, to the Provincial Councillors and the Councillors resist and kick up a shindy and the order is not carried out, you must at once dismiss any Councillors who have not obeyed the order and yourself appoint new ones from the Province – do not let the Knights choose them. This will show them that you mean to be master and that they have to be vassals. The families of Schulenburg, Alvensleben, and Bismarck are the most distinguished and the worst. You must not appoint any native of the Altmark to its Provincial government; send them to Pomerania and Prussia, but not to Magdeburg, for Magdeburg has many connections with the Altmark. The Knesebeck family is a bad one, too. The vassals of Prignitz are much better, the same type as those of the Neumark.

The land and cities of Magdeburg are fine ones. The vassals are like those of the Altmark, but almost worse still. You must not appoint any Magdeburger to the Provincial government of Magdeor Halberstadt, nor to the Altmark; they can be sent to Prussia, Pomerania, Mittelmark, Minden, or Cleves. The domains are in a very good state; improvements are possible, but at the outside they could be made to produce 30,000 to 40,000 thalers more.

As to Halberstadt and Hohenstein, the vassals are like the Magdeburgers. You must not appoint natives to the Provincial government, but take them from other Provinces. As to the economy, it is very good, but there are still many improvements that could be made, especially in Hohenstein.

As to the salt mines and other mines in Magdeburg, the salt mines are in a good condition. My successor must set to work and find ways of improving the sales, then they will be excellent. As to the Wettin coal mines, I now draw 20,000 thalers a year from them; if you go into things there carefully you must be able to get another 10,000 a year, above the 20,000, that is sure.

As to Minden, Ravensberg, Tecklenburg, and Lingen, the vassals are stupid and opinionated, you cannot employ them much, for they are too easygoing to make good employees, but they are not so bad as the Altmarkers, for if you put on a gracious face and manner toward them they will do what you want. The domains are in good condition. Some reorganization is necessary, then you can well get another 10,000 to 20,000 thalers a year more, here and there.

As to the County and Mark of Cleves, the vassals are stupid oxen but malicious as the Devil. They are very tenacious of their privileges, but meanwhile they will do and give what my successor demands of them. As to the Provincial government, follow the same rule with them as with the Altmarkers. The people are great intriguants, and false into the bargain, and soak like beasts, that is all they know to do. If a Clevelander comes from home very young and is brought up in Berlin, he can be made into a good, sound, clever fellow, whom my successor can well use. In their private lives they are bad managers, for they consume more than their revenues produce. The domains are in right good condition, but could be improved to yield at least 40,000 thalers a year, if not more.

As to Mörs and Gelder, the Mörsers are like the Clevelanders but very good Dutchmen, as the Clevelanders, too, are better Dutchmen and Emperor's men than Prussians. The revenue from the Mörs domains could be raised by improvements from 5,000 to 6,000 thalers. As for the Gelder, the vassals are Emperor's men through and through. My successor must keep a sharp eye on the Marquis de Honsbrug, who is a godless fellow toward his sovereign and would place himself under the allegiance of the Emperor at once if he only had a chance and is only waiting for the opportunity. As to the domains, they could well be improved. The annual revenue is 10,000 thalers. So I have been through all the Provinces and given a general idea of the chief points and have left this description to my successor, to give him a general idea of his realm.

My dear successor must visit his Lands and Provinces each year, as I have done, then he will learn to know his regiments and army, his lands and peoples, and will see for himself that good improvements can be made in the domains of all Provinces and at least 600,000 to 800,000 thalers a year more revenue got out of them without oppressing the subjects. The revenue from domains can certainly be increased by good application and economy if my dear successor puts his mind to it and prays diligently to God and himself works diligently, then it will certainly succeed, may Almighty God help him to it, Amen!

[...]

As to finances: when I am dead, my dear successor must not go back into past history, to see whether this or that person has robbed me, for while you are distracting yourself with old matters, the new will fall into the greatest confusion, and while you are occupying yourself with old history your servants will rob you. This is how I acted, and got on very comfortably, but your servants will tell you that so and so has robbed the late King of 1,000 or 20,000 thalers. They will try to divert your attention to old history, so as to keep it from their own doings, and the reason why they want to let everything fall into disorder is that troubled waters are good to fish in.

[...]

It is true that I am leaving you a treasury in which there is quite a pretty sum of money, but it is indispensable for a Prince to have ready money; for – while may God preserve you from war and plague – if some Provinces fail, war costs a terrible lot of money, but if you have a good, well-larded treasury, you can support this misfortune, so you must add at least 500,000 a year to the present treasure for a formidable army, and a big treasure to mobilize the army in case of need can give you a big standing in the world and you will be able to make your voice heard, like other Powers. [...]

As to religion, I am a Calvinist, and with God's help I shall die one, but I am assured that a Lutheran who lives a godly life will achieve blessedness as well as a Calvinist, and the difference has been created only by quarrels between the preachers; so hold Calvinists and Lutherans in equal honor, do good to both religions and make no difference between them – God will bless you for it, and you will be beloved on all sides. [...] Do good to the poor and let no poor man in your land suffer want and help as much you can, God will requite you ten thousand fold.

[...]

My dear Successor must not let the preachers of either religion meddle in worldly affairs, for they like meddling in worldly affairs and have to be kept on a tight rein, for the clergy would like to be the Popes in our faith, for with the Papacy the priests decide everything.

[...]

[Catholics must be tolerated as stipulated in international agreements—the Peace of Westphalia and the Treaty of Wehlau] but [...]

You must not tolerate Jesuits in your lands. They are devils who are capable of much evil and intrigue against you and the whole community, so you must not allow them to settle in your lands, under whatever pretext they try to do so.

[...]

As regards the French, or refugees, my Successor must confirm the privileges granted by the Elector Frederick William, but you can with a good conscience cut and economize 22,000 out of the 44,000 that I give them every year out of the exchequer, for many people are drawing pensions out of the 44,000 who do not need them at all, being very well off. For the rest, the French are very industrious people who have made the towns in our country capable of producing manufactures, for fifty years ago no fine cloths, stockings, crepe, velvet or woolen goods were manufactured here, and we had to import these from England, France, the Netherlands, now our lands export considerable quantities all over Germany.

[...]

The Jews. As to the Jews, there are, unfortunately, very many in our lands who have no letters of protection from me. Those you must chase out of the country, because the Jews are locusts in a country and ruin the Christians. I beseech you to issue no new letters of protection, even if they offer you large sums for them, because it will be a great damage to you and the ruin of your subjects. [...]

My dear successor, I beseech you for God's sake to preserve your army well and to strengthen it more and more and not to split it up, as my father Frederick, King in Prussia, did in the last French war, but always keep your army together, then you will see how you are sought after by all Powers of the world and will be able to hold the balance in Europe, for it will depend on you, for if one can hold the balance in the world there is always some profit to be got for one's lands, and you will be respected by your friends and dreaded by your enemies.

My dear successor must therefore not split up his fine army and give no troops for money and subsidies to Emperor, England, Holland, but must return the Powers the answer that I have given them: if you want to have troops, I will march myself with my whole army but not for subsidies, but give me land and men, which is what I want, then I will march, but not before. No country, no Prussian [*Paing de Pais Poing de Prussien*] is what best serves the interest, welfare, and glory of you and the land. You must draw the bow tight; if they need you they will have to give you what you ask, if they don't need you you sit quiet with your army, and wait for a good opportunity, for your affairs are in order. What does it profit you to sacrifice your army for a bagatelle for the benefit of Englishmen, Emperor, or Dutchmen, this would be the greatest folly in the world, but you have too much sense to cut such a caper. Your Imperial contingent consists of 14,000 men. These you must provide, but not from your army. You must recruit foreign troops – ten squadrons and ten battalions – against annual subsidies from small German principalities, Gotha, Darmstadt, Breitensbach, Eisenach, they must do for the 14,000 men. You must send one of your Generals with them as commander. The Ministers will do everything to split your army up, but take my advice, it is good, and I have learned all this by experience, and what do you get from it if you let your army be sacrificed, you always get money again, but if your country is depopulated, that is difficult to make good. The welfare of a ruler is if his land is well populated, that is the true riches of a land. If your army marches outside the country the excise will not bring in a third as much as if the army is in the country. The prices of commodities will fall, then the Crown agents will not be able to pay their rents in full, it is total ruin.

I beseech my dear successor in God's name not to start any unjust wars and not to be an aggressor, for God has forbidden unjust wars and one day you will have to give account for every man who has fallen in an unjust war. Consider that God's judgment is sharp, read history, there you will find that unjust wars have come to no good end, you have for examples King Louis XIV in France, King Augustus of Poland, the

Elector of Bavaria, and many others. The two last were expelled from their lands and dethroned into the bargain because they started an unjust war. Be assured that God gives an army its heart, and also takes it away from the soldiers, for when King Augustus began a very unjust war, his Saxon army was so frightened of the Swedes that in many battles and encounters the Saxons were beaten by the enemy even when they were twice as strong as the Swedes, for the Saxons were always in fear in this unjust war, so that they refused to stand and fight. There my dear successor can see the hand of God, the Saxons are otherwise brave people and have always served bravely in Brabant and the Reich, but as soon as their King engaged in an unjust war the heart was gone out of them. I therefore beseech my dear successor not to begin an unjust war, then dear God will always bless you and your army and will give courage. You are, indeed, a great lord on earth, but you will have to render account before God for all unjust wars and blood that you have caused to be spilled, that is a hard thing, so I beseech you, keep a clear conscience before God, then you will enjoy a happy rule.

You must be very cautious in entering into alliances with great lords and promise nothing that you cannot keep and nothing that is against the word of God and against your country's interests. [...]

[Here follow counsels on what relations the recipient of these instructions should follow with other powers: close friendship with Russia, good relations with Poland – but everything must be done to ensure that it remains a republic. “Always be on your guard against the House of Austria and the Emperor, who is very jealous of Prussia and its army,” etc. Frederick William is not opposed to Brandenburg’s sending troops against France, if properly rewarded, “but not to Italy or Hungary, this is against your interest and total ruin of your army and too far away from your own country.”]

I beg my dear successor to take no decision in affairs of State until you have considered everything well with your Ministers for Foreign Affairs. For if you spend a year listening to your Ministers speak and report on affairs you will soon learn and understand the subject and will learn to understand where your interest lies.

My dearest successor will think and say, why did my late father not act in all things as is written here? This is the reason. When my late father died in 1713, I found the land of Prussia practically a dead country, from human and cattle plague, all the Crown lands in the whole country, or most of them, pledged, or let under hereditary leases all of which I had to redeem, while the finances were in such a state that we were on the verge of bankruptcy. The army in so bad a condition and so small in numbers that I cannot even describe all that was wrong. It is certainly a masterpiece that in nine years, by 1722, I have gotten everything back into such good order and condition, and your estates are unencumbered with debt, your army and artillery in such a state as to count in Europe, and I assure you that I have had little help from my servants, but have rather been impeded by them, directly and indirectly. So I have not been able to do more in these nine years, but my dear successor will certainly be able to achieve everything that is written here in the instructions after my death. I wish my dear successor all good fortune and Divine blessing in this, and should God grant me a few more years of life, I shall myself be able to achieve much, as it stands here. Should I live longer I will write a supplement to these instructions, meanwhile I commend all to God and beg you to read it through often with reflection and attention; I am persuaded that you will find use in it and will follow me, for I have myself learned everything through experience, and in my time I have myself tried many experiments.

My dear successor, if you have loved me during my life, so after my death you can show your love to me by making the King's Regiment your regiment and leaving it with its present pay and distinguish it for my sake; secondly, continue to enlarge the town of Potsdam and give it the name of Wilhelmsstadt, for which God will give it His blessing.

Meanwhile I commend my soul to God and herewith give you once again my paternal blessing and wish you to keep God before your eyes and to rule your lands justly and in fear of God, and may you always

have loyal servants and obedient subjects and a strong arm and a victorious army against all your enemies, and I pray that you, my dear successor, and those that come after you, may prosper as Kings and Electors to the end of the world, and that your provinces may prosper from hour to hour. May Almighty God help you to this through Jesus Christ!

Your true father, till death

F. William

Potsdam, the 17th February, 1722

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. 309-22. 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: Georg Küntzel and Martin Hass, eds. *Die Politischen Testamente der Hohenzollern: Nebst ergänzenden Aktenstücken* [*The Political Testaments of the Hohenzollerns: With Supplementary Documentation*], vol I. Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1911, pp. 69-94.

Recommended Citation: The Political Testament of Frederick William I (“the Soldier King”) (February 17, 1722), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/the-holy-roman-empire-1648-1815/ghdi:document-3544>> [July 16, 2024].