

# Political Testament of Frederick William I

## The "Soldier King"

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*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... 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 drink and gorge, which lead to a dissolute life. Neither must my dear successor allow any comedies, operas, ballets [etc.] 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....

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....

### **Finances and the Military**

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....

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.

### **The Lands, the People, and the Economy**

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....

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 woolens; for that purpose my successor must forbid the importation of all foreign woolen 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....

### The Nobility

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... 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... 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....

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 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....

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....

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....

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....

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....**

### Religion

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....

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....

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....

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....

### Foreign Policy

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... if they need you they will have to give you what you ask, if they don't need you, sit quiet with your army, and wait for a good opportunity... 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... 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....

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....

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... May Almighty God help you to this through Jesus Christ!

*Your true father, till death*

*F. William*

*Potsdam, the 17th February, 1722*

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