



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815

Political Testament of Landgrave Georg II of Hesse-Darmstadt (June 4, 1660)

Landgrave George II of Hesse-Darmstadt (r. 1626-61) weathered the Thirty Years War and an embittered succession dispute. According to historian Volker Press, he was a “pious man, who took pride in having read the Bible no fewer than 47 times.” Whereas a Calvinist dynasty ruled Hesse-Kassel, a determined Lutheranism held sway in George II’s Hesse-Darmstadt. George’s views identify him as an old-fashioned patriarch. In the document below, he preaches Christian virtues, denounces vice, and urges respect for the Holy Roman Emperor “in all things that are neither contrary to God’s honor and teachings, nor to German liberty [*teutsche Libertät*],” the latter being a reference to the liberties of the territorial princes vis-à-vis the (Catholic Habsburg) emperor. But George expected the emperor to preserve “our fatherland of the German nation from destructive anarchy.”

It is not enough that a regent is God-fearing and pious and devoted to the true religion with mouth and heart, but rather it is also demanded from him that he carry out the office of high authority in effect as a faithful father of his country, and, as the Holy Scripture says in this case, as a servant of the Christian church, that he lead the subjects entrusted to him by God to the true Christian faith and righteous piety and hold them to it. So we pray first and foremost to the Almighty from the depths of our hearts that the Almighty may uphold our beloved son and his progeny and our aforementioned successors in the only true religion of the unaltered Augsburg Confession, which through God's grace is in full swing and practice in our principality and lands, and that they may be strengthened and fortified through the power and assistance of the Holy Spirit. [. . .]

Our son and successor has to consider in all matters: God sees it, and His glory and approval should be his only purpose. Our successor should examine his own work, and ask himself, when possible every evening, what good he has done that day. He should modify all worldly actions, senses, and thoughts with this clause: as long as it pleases God. He should not think of undertaking anything if he does not have good cause and certainty to think that it is righteous and good. When important issues come up, as seems to happen in worldly governments with careful regents frequently in recent times, he should hold to God even more assiduously with his dear prayers, that the Almighty may lead him to the right path and bless his doings, and he should place his trust in no person, but rather only in God. In addition to the ardent order that all matters be placed in God's hands, he should use the means granted by God, namely that in devotion he diligently consider the matters. Depending on the occasion and the circumstances, he should ask for recommendations and considerations from close relatives and those most

interested (those who are most dependent upon the preservation and welfare of our princely house, and those who are loyal to him and well intentioned). He should consult his privy and other councilors not only in their councils, but also privately, one after another, and communicate his concerns to them. He should not only listen to good advice, but also follow it. When something has been carefully decided, he should be steadfast about holding to it. He should treat poorly no one who has provided his opinion to the best of his understanding and thinking, so that he will not be intimidated or scared away from speaking frankly and warning of the prince's detriment. [. . .]

In such a high and important office he should be diligently sober, because the Holy Word describes to us the faithful people, who have retained the blessings of God, with a sober lifestyle. He who desires wine will never be wise, and no one who is not wise is capable of governing. What kind of ruefulness can a regent cause, when he is too much given to drinking! He deprives his spouse and children of the best of their worldly treasures, divests his siblings of their comfort, robs his churches, schools, chancelleries, councilors, servants, lands, and people of their superior, robs the commonwealth of its protector, robs his own fatherland of its father, and even robs himself of his life and princely renown. There are also examples that God, out of justified wrath, has removed his hand from high heads, so that they fell into drunkenness and almost visibly fell into sinfulness.

We faithfully warn all of our dear children against whoring and fornication, especially our dear son and successor, the future regent. He himself should not only keep himself chaste and unsullied, but should foster the virtue of chastity and punish the vice of fornication in the whole land. He should do this in Christian consideration that ecclesiastical and worldly histories have proven that entire kingdoms, principalities, counties, and territories have often fallen due to the sin of fornication, and that almost no sin is found that God rewards so gruesomely with flood, fire, hunger, and war.

The [Holy] Roman Imperial Majesty is the superior authority over him and all the estates of the Holy [Roman] Empire, and he should hold him in great honor and dignity and show all proper and dutiful obedience in all things that are not contrary to God's honor and teaching, or to German liberty (which is not to be expected from His Imperial Majesty, as a most worthy emperor and ruler). He, our son and successor, should reasonably work and try and strive, on and on, to venerate from his whole heart the [Holy] Roman Emperor as the one anointed by the Lord, and to give thanks to God that the Almighty has protected our fatherland, the German nation, from deleterious anarchy and has blessed us with a Christian and wise ruler. [. . .]

Our aforementioned son and successor should happily serve everyone and strive to do much that is useful and good, and consider any day he did not do something virtuous as lost. He should work hard to be a pillar of the fatherland; an honor to our house; a comfort to all of our princely relatives and dependents; an ease for himself; a good, pious, and appreciative father to his councilors and servants; a crown and a shield to his subjects; and a sanctuary for everyone.

Source of original German text: *Politische Testamente und andere Quellen zum Fürstenethos der frühen Neuzeit* [*Political Testaments and other Sources on the Princely Ethos of the Early Modern Age*], edited by Heinz Duchhardt. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987, pp. 43-76.

Reprinted in Helmut Neuhaus, ed., *Zeitalter des Absolutismus 1648-1789* [*The Era of Absolutism, 1648-1789*]. *Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung*, edited by Rainer A. Müller, volume 5. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1997, pp. 192-96.

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