

**THE INTENDANT AS
A POLITICAL AGENT
UNDER LOUIS XIV**

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ALLEN JOHNSON

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*Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of
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BY

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INTRODUCTION.

As one turns the leaves of the voluminous administrative correspondence of the old régime and reads here and there, his first impression is that of prodigious activity amid bewildering diversity and complexity. The pages are crowded with obscure allusions to peculiar local customs; dignitaries of more or less importance appear and disappear; titles and offices multiply to distraction. The student is tempted to believe the old régime a chaos. It is not long, however, before the figure of one administrative officer emerges with tolerable clearness; the *intendant* seems omnipresent. And yet, when one attempts to give definiteness to his duties, chaos threatens to reign again. There is something vexingly elusive about the intendant. Viewed from one point, he is the submissive creature of the *contrôleur*; viewed in another light, he seems to rule as absolutely as the great monarch himself. Whether he is overwhelmed with popular applause in Pau or cursed with virulent fury in Poitou, the old régime is inseparably associated with his name.

The difficulty of putting the intendant's duties into precise form arises largely from the habit of regarding him as an administrative officer, pure and simple, when it should be borne in mind that the intendant was peculiarly *hors de loi*. He was bound by no established administrative statutes or regulations; not even his commission was registered in Parlement. To the local authorities he owed no obedience, since local laws and *coutumes* had crystalized centuries before the intendant became a part of the administrative organism. He received frequent instructions from the king in council and from the ministers, it is true, but in general he was left singularly free to exercise his discretion. Given the ends in view, he was nearly always permitted to choose the means best suited to reach them. Such freedom might have proved inimical to the interests of the crown, if the intendant had

not been brought into immediate touch with the royal council and with the chief ministers of state by a minute and regular correspondence. This intimate connection made him responsive to the slightest wish of the king,—made him in fact the supple, subservient agent of royalty for the gratification of its every whim. When the crown felt itself menaced from any quarter and was forced to act with the full weight of its authority, a trusted officer was at hand to secure obedience to its behests. The last word upon the great historical movements of "le grand siècle" will not be said until full credit is accorded to the intendants for their unceasing labors in behalf of absolutism.

Few thoughtful readers have laid aside De Tocqueville's brilliant review of the intendants without a desire to know more of the men who have exercised so profound an influence upon French institutions. In the following pages an attempt has been made to illustrate the nature of the intendant's office by selecting the more important phases of his activity in a period when the social and political fabric of the old régime was assuming its permanent form. The picture must necessarily be defective. De Tocqueville has remarked with pardonable exaggeration that under the old régime the government took the place of Providence. The student who has followed the tortuous course of the government under Louis XIV. will be inclined to acquiesce in this sentiment; assuredly the ways of that government seem often as inscrutable as those of Providence.

The writer gladly takes this opportunity to acknowledge his indebtedness to Professor James Harvey Robinson of Columbia University for many helpful suggestions, and to Mr. George H. Baker, Librarian of the Columbia College Library, for repeated favors. Thanks are due also to the authorities of the Harvard College Library for their kind attentions.

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CHAPTER I.

ORIGIN AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE OFFICE OF INTENDANT.

There is no more persistent error among historians than that which ascribes to Cardinal Richelieu the creation of the institution of the intendants. The source of the error is clear enough. In the collection known as *anciennes lois françaises* occurs an edict of the year 1635, which the editor has dubbed "*Édit de Création des Intendants.*" The name *intendant* appears in connection with several financial offices, either newly created or reorganized, and the editor seems to have jumped at the conclusion that he had before him a document actually creating the institution so familiar to students of the old régime. The blunder was detected many years ago, but historians continue to perpetuate the illusion. It is comparatively easy to show that the word *intendant* in the edict of 1635 is to be understood in a totally different sense from that of the same word used in the phrase *intendant de justice*; and it is still easier to prove that intendants were in existence before the year 1635.* The former line of evidence has been restated too often to need reiteration here, but the latter may be profitably reviewed.

The first intendant of whom record is preserved is Pierre

*See Caillot: *De l'Administration en France*, I, pp. 71 et seq. This work, published in 1867, proved beyond a doubt that the edict of 1635 did not create the office of intendant, but simply created, or altered the nature of, certain officers known as *présidents et trésoriers généraux des finances*.

M. Hanotaux cites an instance where certain *présidents* and *trésoriers* at Montpellier styled themselves *intendants des gabelles*. Hanotaux: *Les origines des Intendants*, p. 2.

Even in the time of Louis XIV. we find numerous instances of the title used in its most general sense, where no reference to the royal intendant or *commissaire départi* is intended.

Panisse, who was commissioned about the year 1555 to go to Corsica as *intendant de justice*.* The island had recently fallen into the possession of the French and the king desired to establish order there by means of a royal agent. To this end Panisse—"nostre amé et féal conseiller Président en nostre court des Généraux de la Justice des Aydes à Montpellier"—was given "plain pouvoir, auctorité, commission et mandement spécial" to confer with the lieutenant-governor and to summon in assembly the notables and officials of the island. He was to learn from them the customs, laws and usages in the administration of justice. Over all courts he was to have "la superintendance générale," and his regulative ordinances were to be final "comme s'ilz avaiant esté ou estaient donnez par l'une de noz courts de Parlement." He was to go about from town to town to inform himself in regard to the local laws and customs and to exercise such police powers as he deemed necessary. The conduct of civil officers was to be noted "diligemment, secrètement et bien." He might even suspend them from office, if occasion demanded. Officers of finance were to be subjected to the same scrutiny. All abuses were to be reported to the *conseil privé*; although in urgent cases the intendant might undertake their correction upon consultation with the governor.

The essential character of the institution and the lines of its future development are indicated in this commission.† The intendant is to represent the king in matters of justice, police, and finance in parts of the realm where war had almost subverted the social order. He is completely dependent upon the royal will in regard to both appointment and tenure of office; he is essentially the king's man. And yet, from the very nature of the circumstances that make his office necessary, he possesses, and must possess, no little discretionary power to encounter successfully the opposition which the faithful performance of his duties will inevitably arouse.

The links in the chain that binds the first intendants to those of the time of Richelieu may be easily supplied. The admirable exposition of M. Hanotaux‡ has done much to make the connec-

* Hanotaux: *Pièces just.* I. p. 179.

† "Elle est comme un raccourci de toute l'institution dont elle est la première ébauche." Hanotaux, p. 23.

‡ Hanotaux: *Origines des Intendants.*

tion intelligible, and all students of the institutions of the old régime will gladly acknowledge their indebtedness to his work.

During the years of civil war in France, when the royal power was reduced to a mere shadow, there are few records of intendants actually bearing the title. Royal commissioners were numerous, but their functions are not to be confounded with those of the intendants of succeeding years, however much the practice of commissioning such royal agents may have contributed to the final triumph of the system of permanent intendants. The office of royal commissioner was ill-defined; his authority was vague and transitory.*

With the revival of the monarchy under Henry IV. the intendants spring into new prominence, and for obvious reasons. Two gigantic tasks confronted Henry of Navarre: he had first to conquer the land of which he was only grudgingly named king; and then, task scarcely less onerous, he had to pacify and rehabilitate his kingdom. It was no easy matter to stay the hand of the rough soldier who had helped to win the allegiance of some rebellious province and who now lusted after the spoils of victory; nor, on the other hand, to provide for the legitimate needs of the army of occupation, without kindling once more the hatred of the newly regained province. Due regard for the support of the soldiers had to be joined with generous respect for the feelings of the people. The conditions were unusual and fully justified the plan adopted by the king.† By the side of the governor of a province and the commander of the army of pacification was placed an officer bearing a royal mandate which conferred upon him extraordinary powers within the province where the army was to operate. In nearly every instance he bore the title of intendant, but with certain phrases added to indicate the particular duties for which he was commissioned. He might be "*intendant de justice*" in an army and act as counselor to the general in matters relating to the preservation of order and discipline among the soldiers. He might be charged with the "*intendance des finances*" in an army and have supervision of the moneys raised for the support of the troops, or he might combine all these duties and be styled "*Intendant de justice, de police, des vivres et des finances*"

* Hanotaux, pp. 31-35.

† Hanotaux, pp. 41 et seq.

in a specified army. In each and every case the sphere of his influence and power was the province where the army of pacification was located.

The transformation of the intendant of an army into the intendant of a province was only natural. It might often happen that an intendant would remain for a time in the province after the immediate occasion for his coming had passed away. He would then almost imperceptibly become *intendant de province*.* Here, then, was a tendency which, had it not been retarded by the activity of the government in other affairs, might have made the intendency what it became in the reign of Louis XIV., a permanent office. By the year 1598, the first task of Henry had been achieved; he could then fairly claim to be master of his kingdom and could begin with confidence the economic and financial restoration of France. Sure of the support of magistrates and people, the king could now dispense with the intendants. They had not yet acquired enough stability to exist after the immediate needs to which they owed their existence had been met. If they did not entirely disappear, they became so few as to escape notice. For the re-establishment of order in the finances, which now became the chief concern of Henry and his minister Sully, recourse was had once more to royal commissioners, who have erroneously been confounded with the intendants, because the term intendant was sometimes applied to them in contemporary documents. The error is of exactly the same sort as that in regard to the edict of 1635. *Intendant* is used in a general sense to designate a class of officers with supervisory powers, not the particular agent whom we have met as *intendant de justice*.†

The death of Henry IV. left France once more a prey to the decentralizing forces which he had overcome with so much difficulty. The regency grasped desperately at the only means which would preserve its own existence: the revival of the intendants. Many of the old intendants were recommissioned; new ones were appointed until there was hardly a disaffected province where the royal power was not represented in the person of an intendant. Commissions varied between different intendants in different provinces, and between intendants who succeeded one another in the same province, but the tendency was to unite the various

* Hanotaux, pp. 45-56.

† M. Hanotaux puts this point beyond dispute by several citations. See page 72.