

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 161.  
The Crusade Against the Cathars.  
The Siege of Toulouse, 1217.

Hello again. Last week we saw Simon de Montfort move to the east to subdue the Rhone Valley, only to receive the disturbing news that the rebel Counts had entered the city of Toulouse, which had erupted into full rebellion. As we stated last week, Simon's wife Alice was inside Toulouse, or more specifically inside the Narbonnais Castle, when the rebellion broke out. Apparently Alice was overheard stating as she looked out a castle window onto the streets full of rebellious citizens below, and I quote "Alas, yesterday everything was going so well" end quote.

As we saw last week, Alice's first move was to send two urgent messages, one to her brother-in-law, Guy de Montfort in Carcassonne, and one to Simon way out east in the Rhone Valley. Now, it took Simon three weeks to arrive back in Toulouse. According to Mark Pegg in his book "A Most Holy War", the messenger sent to inform Simon of the siege didn't change horses, preferring to travel hard for two days, then rest his horse for the third day. Consequently, it took him a full two weeks to travel to Simon's camp outside the castle of Crest. Apparently when he arrived, negotiations to conclude the siege were at a critical juncture. Knowing full well that if news spread that Simon's main city back in Languedoc was in rebellion, it would adversely affect the negotiations, Simon ordered the messenger not to reveal the contents of his message to anyone, but to act relaxed and happy, as if the news he was bearing was pleasing. Simon too acted relaxed and happy and was forced to pretend that he had all the time in the world to conclude the negotiations. A few days later, everything was settled, and Simon could finally gather his men and race back to Toulouse, arriving there three weeks after the rebellion had broken out.

The rebels had made good use of their time. As soon as the rebel Counts had arrived in the city, its citizens responded. Arming themselves with whatever weapons they could find, they created temporary barricades in the streets, and attacked any northern Frenchmen they came across. As the days passed, the real work began. Toulouse's defensive walls had been all but destroyed by Simon's efforts and by Prince Louis' Crusaders. The Toulousans knew that it was vital that they created some sort of defensive structures before Simon or Guy showed up with their armies, so the city Council, which had been abolished by Simon, was reformed, and they began the task of assessing what needed to be done and allocating work to the citizens of the town. And when I say the citizens of the town, I mean all the citizens of the town. Not only strapping young men of a rebellious nature were put to work, everyone was: noble men and women toiled alongside children, merchants, peasants, servants, and even some churchmen. Anyone who refused to join in or who looked dubious about the rebel cause was expelled from the town.

The citizens rapidly created wooden barriers and dug defensive ditches. The anonymous troubadour spoke of the magnificent toil of the citizens as they worked to build an unbroken defensive line of barricades and ditches between the River Garonne and one of the main cathedrals in the city. In the absence of defensive walls or towers, it was decided to turn the city's main churches into fortresses, with their solid walls providing protection for the citizens. Archers and crossbowmen would be stationed in the bell tower and pinnacle of the main cathedral in the city, with the building taking on a new role, not as a place of worship but as a defensive fortification.

By the time Simon's brother Guy arrived at Toulouse with his hastily assembled army, enough work had been completed that the Toulousans were able to repel his attack. Guy arrived at Toulouse around the 23rd of September 1217. He was able to make it past barricades that had been constructed around one of the city gates, and leaving his horses and his baggage train outside the gate, Guy and his men pushed through the obstructions on foot and began to fight their way into the city. They were confronted by the Count of Foix and his men, who were also on foot, and as more and more defenders rushed in to help, Guy and his men were pushed back outside the city gate. Guy then re-mounted his horse and entered the city via a different gate. Once again, they were opposed by mobs of defenders and were easily repelled. A few of Guy's men were captured during the fighting, and were quickly and publicly hanged, indicating to the Crusaders the depth of feeling against them amongst the Toulousans.

The focus, of course, of both the attackers and the defenders was the Narbonnais Castle and military historians have postulated that the two assaults by Guy were actually diversions, and that the Crusaders' main focus was always the castle. The defenders may have gathered this also, as the anonymous troubadour reports that during the entire attack by Guy's men, the Count of Comminges had positioned himself outside the Narbonnais Castle, keeping a close eye on both the comings and goings within the castle and the baggage trains outside the Narbonnais Gate. Finding that he was neither able to subdue the city nor defeat the attackers, Guy finally turned his attention to the Narbonnais Castle. He was able to enter it and garrisoned it with his own men, taking over a couple of houses adjacent to the castle in order to expand the castle's defenses.

With Guy de Montfort, now stationed inside the Narbonnais Castle and with the rebellion still in full swing inside the city, both sides then called for reinforcements. It's safe to say that the rebels didn't have any trouble attracting men from outside Toulouse willing to fight for their cause. As word of the rebellion spread, routiers and southern Frenchmen throughout the County of Toulouse, who had been itching to take a shot at their northern French occupiers, sharpened their swords, waved good bye to their families and headed off to the city of Toulouse to join the rebellion. Inside Toulouse at this time, morale was high amongst the Toulousans. Especially at night time, candles and torches burned in the streets as the rebels kept watch, with musicians playing drums and bugles, frequently striking up tunes to keep the watchers alert, which then attracted dancers and singers who joined in, until the streets of Toulouse resembled a festival of rebellion.

Guy of Montfort, who had now taken charge of both the Narbonnais Castle and the defence of the city, sent a message to the Archbishop of Auch in the west, then settled in to wait for his brother Simon to arrive with the Crusader army. To complete this flurry of message-sending, Raymond VI sent a message to his son, Raymond, over in the Rhone Valley to the east, letting him know of the situation.

Simon and his army arrived at Toulouse in early October 1217. He had made good use of his time during his journey, dispatching riders to loyal men of the Church residing along the way, telling them to send men to the aid of the Crusaders. The Papal Legate Bertrand traveled with Simon's entourage, as did Guy of Les Vaux-de-Cernay and his nephew, Peter the Monk.

Now, Peter the Monk, unfortunately, seems to drop the ball at the siege of Toulouse. For an epic military campaign that is one of the most important of the entire Crusade, Peter

deals with it briefly and in a haphazard sort of manner. Historians have speculated that perhaps Peter was only present at some stages of the siege, and perhaps even that Peter himself died not long after he finished writing about the siege, leaving the final section of his "Historia Albigensis" incomplete and in draft form. I guess we'll never know. Fortunately for us, the anonymous troubadour gives a full account of the siege, as does William of Puylaurens, so it is upon their work that we will be relying for contemporary accounts of the siege.

Anyway, back to the action. Shortly after arriving at Toulouse, Simon decided to attempt to storm the defenses and retake the city. A discussion was held with the Papal Legate Bertrand, in which it was decided that no mercy should be shown to the rebels. Once Toulouse was recaptured, every man and woman inside the town would be put to the sword. With this decided, Simon ordered his army into position. Now, at this point, Simon is either feeling extremely confident in the abilities of his army, or he is blinded by the same post-Beaucaire rage that has affected his judgment since his defeat by young Raymond. His confidence perhaps arose from the fact that he is not really facing an army at Toulouse. The majority of the people opposing him are civilians, and he would have been advised of this fact by his brother Guy, who has been keeping an eye on the activities of the rebels from his position inside the Narbonnais Castle. Also, the town's formidable defences had been destroyed by him to insure against exactly this type of scenario. So the main defenses holding the Crusaders at bay were ramshackle ones which had been hastily constructed by the citizens themselves.

So perhaps it was for these reasons that Simon decided to use the Crusader army to attack in broad daylight, in full view of the rebels, without much thought or planning. The Crusader army lined up outside the walls of the city between the Montguillard and the Montoulieu Gates, intending to charge the damaged walls, breach them, and burst into the city. However, the defenders had prepared themselves well. In front of the wall they had dug a deep trench and filled it with sharpened stakes. They also had time to drag a catapult machine into position and aimed it at the gathering crusaders.

Now, this catapult machine was manned, which is actually probably the wrong expression here, by women. In the delegation of defensive jobs, it was declared that keeping the catapult machines supplied with stones, arming them, aiming them, and firing them would all be carried out by women from the city. As a result, Marc Pegg in his book "A Most Holy War", points out that noble ladies, merchants' wives, and washer women alike had busied themselves for some time, filling baskets and buckets with rocks of all sizes, ranging from those as small as a fist to those as large as a dog. They dragged their baskets of stones over to the catapult machines and prepared to fire when the Crusader army charged. The men of the town armed themselves with makeshift weapons, cudgels, axes, and clubs and stood around waiting to cut down any Crusaders who made it over the wall, while archers and crossbowmen had plenty of time to position themselves on top of the wall, where they could fire at the oncoming army. To complete the defences, the knights from the combined rebel army mounted their horses and waited outside the closest two gates leading out of the city. Their job was to charge out of the gates when the Crusader attack commenced, and confront the Crusader horsemen.

The order to attack was given, and with the cry of "Montfort", the Crusader army charged at the wall. The gates opened and the rebel knights galloped out to confront the army, while the catapult machines launched rocks at the Crusaders, and the sky darkened with arrows, crossbow bolts, spears and stones, all raining down on the charging army. The

attack faltered under this hail of fire-power. According to the anonymous troubadour, only one Crusader made it to the wall, managing to throw a bucket of dirt into the ditch in front of the wall near one of the gates, before he was cut down and killed. According to the anonymous troubadour, it was the accuracy and the quantity of missiles launched from the catapults, as well as arrow-fire, which repelled the attack.

The losses to the Crusader forces were huge, perhaps as many as one third of the entire army being either wounded or killed. One of Simon's son's, Guy, was amongst the casualty list, having been struck by a crossbow bolt which pierced his armor, leaving him with a nasty chest wound. The defeat sent Crusader morale plunging, although the anonymous troubadour reported that not everyone in the Crusader army was disappointed by the turn of events. Apparently, some of Simon's new vassals from Gascony, who had been roped into the Crusader army despite having sympathetic leanings towards the rebels, snickered quietly into their hands and secretly applauded the fact that the city had withstood the assault. Enraged and frustrated by the outcome of his attack, Simon left the battle scene at sunset and made his way into the Narbonnais Castle, where not even the presence of his wife Alice could lighten his dark mood.

But all was not lost, because in the morning one of the Crusading nobles, the Lord of Puylaurens approached Simon with a cunning plan. In fact, as a piece of military strategy, it was not only cunning but very original and imaginative. "Let's", said the Lord of Puylaurens, "build an entirely new city of Toulouse. We can leave the old Toulouse full of rebels, but while we are besieging it, we can build a new town adjacent to the Narbonnais Castle, which would give the Crusaders somewhere to live, as well as controlling the road to Narbonne and increasing the economic stranglehold on Toulouse. The new town could even have its own fortifications and churches and markets, and would make life a whole lot more comfortable if the siege dragged on for ages." Seemingly having worn out his imagination at this point, the Lord of Puylaurens suggested that the town be named New Toulouse. Simon was well pleased with this suggestion, and work on the planning and building of New Toulouse began immediately.

At the same time, Simon increased his blockade of the original city of Toulouse by placing men to the east of the city in the suburb of Saint-Cyprien, with the aim of preventing the Toulousans from using the bridges across the River Garrone for reinforcements and supplies. With the losses incurred during his failed assault on the city, and with winter approaching, Simon was now seriously short of men and blockading the city at two points, while also attempting to construct an entirely new city, wasn't helping the situation. Simon sent messages to his vassals across his vast territory that their presence was required at Toulouse, and if they failed to attend and give their full military support, he would confiscate their lands.

Really, the main town in the County of Toulouse must have been a strange sight through the autumn and winter of 1217. Activity could be seen aplenty. Inside the city of Toulouse, its residents busy themselves building and refining their defenses, making weapons, and constructing more siege engines. Outside Toulouse, in the emerging city of New Toulouse, the Crusaders busied themselves constructing their new town and its defenses.

Both sides had a feeling that this siege was going to continue for quite a while. Both sides were right. Join me next week as the siege of Toulouse continues into the year 1218. Until next week, bye for now.

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