

History of the Crusades. Episode 190. The Baltic Crusades. The Wendish Crusade Part 1. Henry the Lion.

Hello again. Last week we met the Balts and took a quick tour around the Baltic Sea. This week we will start looking at our first military campaign of the Baltic Crusades, the Wendish Crusade. Now, before we march off into the lands of the pagans, we need to get some background. More specifically, we need to look at the politics and current state of affairs in the Holy Roman Empire.

Now, in the 189 episodes of the History of the Crusades Podcast that have preceded this episode, we've never once really sat down and examined the Holy Roman Empire in any great detail. We've mentioned it quite a bit, but I've never really zoomed in to take a closer look. Well, that's about to change. It's time for the Holy Roman Empire to have some time in the spotlight.

What was the holy Roman Empire? Well, it was a complex system of territories in central Europe ruled over by a Holy Roman Emperor. The first Emperor was Charlemagne, crowned by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day in the year 800. The Empire lasted a smidge over one thousand years, until its dissolution in the year 1806. Now, we're not going to do a blow by blow history of the Holy Roman Empire from Charlemagne onwards, that would be a podcast series in itself. No, we will be trying to get a grip on the politics of the Holy Roman Empire as it was in the year 1147, the year when the Crusade against the Wends commenced.

Now, the territory that composed the Holy Roman Empire was a complicated patchwork of Duchies, Kingdoms and Territories, each ruled over by a King, Prince, or Duke, each with its own army and each with its own system of vassalage. Some of these territories were tiny, and others, like the Kingdom of Germany, were large and powerful. With each territory's ruling family having shifting allegiances to other territories and shifting boundaries and conflict between the territories, you might be wondering how they could all come together and call themselves an Empire.

Interestingly, the Holy Roman Empire didn't really have a central, controlling government to speak of. The Princes of the territories within the Holy Roman Empire would meet to elect their Emperor, but the Emperor himself didn't really hold a lot of power over the other Princes. In his book "Germany, Memories of a Nation", Neil MacGregor describes the Holy Roman Empire as, and I quote, "A triumph of creative fragmentation" end quote. He states that, and I quote, "The fragments know they belong together, are part of a unit. The only questions are how tightly they should fit together and who is in charge of the process." End quote. So basically in the first half of the twelfth century, the Holy Roman Empire consisted of a bunch of self-ruling duchies and territories, all of which considered themselves to be part of the Holy Roman Empire, ruled over by a Prince from one of the territories who they elected to be their Emperor.

Now, being elected Holy Roman Emperor during the first half of the twelfth century wasn't as fabulous as it might sound. Why? Well, because being the Holy Roman Emperor didn't entitle you to any extra resources or assistance. You didn't get given a salary or a bunch of bureaucrats to assist you to run the empire, or even an army. You had to use the resources of your own territory to perform your Imperial tasks. So, yes, becoming Holy Roman Emperor did mean that you could add a fancy title to your name, and it did earn you a place in the history books. It also gave you the potential to be a significant player on

the European world stage. But it also added a huge amount of tasks to the already long to-do list that you would have had as ruler of a territory within the Empire.

So, in addition to your usual duties of keeping your nobles in line, balancing the books, building alliances with other territories within the Empire, and addressing conflict between your territory and other territories, if you were the Holy Roman Emperor you also had to conduct diplomatic and foreign affairs business on behalf of the Empire with other European powers, lead the Empire into a war if required, and deal with threats from other powerful families within the Empire who would prefer to see one of their relations or allies to be Emperor. And, of course, often the most challenging task facing an Emperor was maintaining relations with the Pope. The relationship between the Holy Roman Empire and the Papacy was marked by the familiar tension between the Emperor, who believed that the Pope should act in the interests of the Holy Roman Empire, and the Pope, who thought that the Holy Roman Empire should serve the interests of Rome. The degree to which these tensions were felt waxed and waned depending on who exactly was in the role of Emperor and Pope at the time.

Okay, well, that should give you an overview of the workings of the Holy Roman Empire. To understand the politics present on the eve of the Wendish Crusade we need to go back to the year 1125. What happened in the year 1125? Well, Emperor Henry V died. Emperor Henry was the last in a line of Emperors who had been the ruler of the Kingdom of Germany within the Empire. Obviously, the Kingdom of Germany was a significant player within the Holy Roman Empire, and for the last one hundred years, whoever was the King of Germany also became the Holy Roman Emperor. Trouble was, when Henry died he left no legitimate male heir, and no obvious contender to rule either the Kingdom of Germany or the Empire. The two most powerful territories within the Empire at the time, other than Germany, were the Duchy of Swabia, ruled by the Hohenstaufen family, and the Duchy of Saxony to the north. When Henry V, the King of Germany and holder of the title of Emperor, died, he left his personal possessions to his nephew, Duke Frederick II of Swabia, perhaps signaling his wish for the Hohenstaufens of Swabia to be elevated to the Imperial title. However, as was customary, an election would need to be held to choose the new Emperor.

Both of the two obvious contenders stood for election, Duke Frederick II of Swabia, and the Duke of Saxony, Duke Lothair of Supplinburg. The Hohenstaufens were a rising force, and it was clear that the young, savvy Frederick would become a major player if allowed to ascend to the position of Emperor. Perhaps that's why the other contender for the throne, the Duke of Saxony, was elected. The Duke of Saxony was the opposite of the Duke of Swabia. He was in his fifties when the election took place and had no legitimate sons. Saxony was a territory in the northern reaches of the Holy Roman Empire, a significant holding of land below the Danish Peninsula. It had been created back in the tenth century, when Charlemagne conquered the feisty Saxons and annexed their land. Saxony was a significant territory, and Lothair brought a great deal of power to the table, but that power would be tempered by the fact that he had no heirs, and so would be forced to work closely with the other rulers within the Empire to make his reign work. So the Duke of Saxony was duly elected and was crowned King of Germany and then Emperor.

Lothair started his reign by trying to subdue his rivals the Hohenstaufens with military force, which was never going to be easy. While he was deep into his dispute with Swabia, there was a Papal election. Lothair could have taken this opportunity to play the two contenders for Pope off against each other and assert Imperial dominance over Rome,

however he seemed to let the opportunity slip by, and the newly elected Pope, Pope Innocent II, instead began ordering Emperor Lothair around. When Pope Innocent ordered Lothair to take up arms against King Roger II of Sicily, Lothair did exactly that. The rest of his reign was divided between dealing with the Hohenstaufens and jumping into action whenever Pope Innocent ordered him to do so. He died in December 1137, while undertaking a winter crossing of the Alps, coming back from one of the Pope's military campaigns in Sicily.

So now we are back to where we were in 1125, with the Emperor dead, no clear male heirs to take his place, and an election needing to occur. It's pretty obvious who's going to be elected this time. Yes, you guessed it, a Hohenstaufen. The Empire could hold the Hohenstaufens back no longer, it was finally their time to shine. The man elected to be the first King of Germany and Emperor of the Hohenstaufen line was Conrad, younger brother of Frederick II, the man who had run for the position against Lothair. Conrad's opponent for the election to the imperial throne was Henry the Proud, who was Duke of Bavaria and also became Duke of Saxony after the death of the heirless Lothair. Henry the Proud was married to Lothair's daughter, and so was in an ideal position to carry on his father in law's feud with the Hohenstaufens.

And that's exactly what happened. Just as Lothair had commenced his reign trying to subdue the Hohenstaufens, Conrad started his reign trying to subdue Henry the Proud. When Henry refused to recognise Conrad as Emperor, Conrad confiscated Henry's lands, which was a bold move but perhaps not a wise one. Henry's Bavarian and Saxon subjects remained loyal to him, so a civil war then ensued, which occupied both Conrad and Henry, and was still in full swing when Henry died in 1139. Henry's son and heir, a man also called Henry, became Duke of Saxony and Duke of Bavaria. This Henry became known to history as Henry the Lion.

Now Henry the Lion will become a very successful ruler. He will never rise to the position of Emperor, but he was nevertheless a very competent leader who consolidated and expanded his territory and left quite a legacy. That legacy included founding the cities of Munich and Lubeck, but his ambitions and desire for territorial expansion will be kept in check by the man who will succeed Conrad as Emperor, another Hohenstaufen. In fact, the most Hohenstaufen of all Hohenstaufens, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa.

But all that is in the future. Let's rewind back to the year 1147. What's happening in the year 1147? Well, the Civil war between Henry and the Hohenstaufens is officially over. Emperor Conrad defeated young Henry and his uncle following a lengthy siege in the year 1140, and two years later a peace treaty was signed between the two warring families. As a result of the treaty, Henry lost his claim to the Duchy of Bavaria. He is, however, still the Duke of Saxony.

Now, if you want a picture of Henry the Lion in his prime, well he looks oddly similar to the lion in The Wizard of Oz. How did I discover this? Well, if you Google Henry the Lion, you will come across a statue that is generally believed to represent Henry the Lion. Now this statue was created some decades after Henry's death, so it may not be a true representation of how he looked, but it shows a powerfully built, stocky man with a round face. Now this statue kept reminding me of something. It kept bugging me until they finally put my finger on it. The statue of Henry the Lion reminded me of the lion in the Wizard of Oz movie. Now I know it was probably some weird mental connection to do with the lion part of his name, but to my mind at least, he does look sort of lion-ey, lion-ey in a Wizard

of Oz lion sort of way. Of course, that's where the comparison ends, because the lion in the Wizard of Oz lacked courage, and as we will see, courage was an attribute that Henry the Lion possessed in spades.

Anyway, so back in the year 1147 Henry the Lion was a strapping lad aged around seventeen years old, with a burning desire to expand his territory and seek his revenge against his family's traditional rivals the Hohenstaufens. In fact, now would be a good time to start throwing his weight around a bit, because a year earlier, in 1146, Conrad had heard Bernard of Clairvaux preach the Second Crusade at Speyer.

Now it's been a while since the episodes on the Middle Eastern Crusades, so let's do a quick recap. The County of Edessa had fallen out of Christian hands in 1146, and in response the Papacy had called for another Crusade. That call had been answered by King Louis VII of France and Emperor Conrad III. Unfortunately for Conrad, the Crusade will be nothing less than a disaster for him and his German forces, but at the moment Conrad is blissfully unaware of the terrors that lie waiting for him, and is making his way to the Middle East, where he will be defeated by the Seljuk Turks at the Battle of Dorylaeum in October 1147. Now, when Bernard of Clairvaux preached the Crusade, his call had been answered by France and the southern part of the Holy Roman Empire, but in other parts of Europe, particularly Spain and the northern reaches of the Holy Roman Empire, no leaders took up the Cross, and recruitment was meager. In his book "The Northern Crusades", Eric Christiansen states that Bernard of Clairvaux decided to remedy this problem by calling for a couple of extra Crusades closer to home. Firstly, he authorized King Alfonso VII of Castille to take up arms against the Muslims of Spain, and secondly, he called for a Crusade against the pagans of Northern Europe.

On the Thirteenth of March 1147, Bernard of Clairvaux had attended the Reichstag, a meeting of the rulers of the various territories within the Holy Roman Empire, which was held in Frankfurt. At that meeting, the nobles from Saxony made a case to launch a military campaign against the pagan Slavs across the eastern border of Saxony. Sensing an opportunity, Bernard had a word to Pope Eugenius, who issued a Papal Bull in April 1147 authorizing the Christians of northern Europe to take up arms against the pagans in the region. The privileges offered to the Christians who embarked on this northern Crusade would be the same as those offered to the men who traveled to the Holy Land on the Second Crusade. However, Eric Christiansen points out that the aims of the northern Crusade were different. There was to be no agreement reached with the heathen Slavs, no truces or taking tribute from those who remained pagans. Instead, Bernard urged the Crusaders to fight the pagans until, and I quote, "Such time as, by God's help, they shall either be converted or deleted." End quote. Hmm, conversion or deletion. So the only options available to the pagans who were being Crusaded against was baptism or death. No middle ground was available.

Now, the Crusade that had been launched against these pagans didn't occur within a vacuum. There was quite a history of interaction between the pagan Slavs and their Saxon neighbors. Join me next week as we take a look at this history and take a closer look at the target of the Crusade, the Wends, and then we will march off on our first Baltic Crusade. Until next week, bye for now.

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