

History of the Crusades. Episode 210. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XVI. Two Alberts.

Hello again. Last week we saw the field of conflict shift from Livonia to Estonia, with the Germans and the Russians clashing in the Estonian region of Ungannia. When we left last week's episode, the Christianized Ungannians had requested German assistance against Russian aggression, and as a result a bunch of German fighters had made their way to the fortified stronghold of Odenpeh, and were preparing to make a stand against the Russians. They didn't have too long to wait. Russians from Pskov and Novgorod invaded the region and, along with their Estonian allies, besieged Odenpeh.

Now, this seems to have been a major incident involving many thousands of fighters. Our chronicler, Henry of Livonia, reports that the Russian forces numbered around 20,000 men, and in his book "The Baltic Crusade" William Urban suggests that this may not have been an exaggerated figure. The Germans had made many enemies in Estonia, and Henry of Livonia reports that many pagan Estonians, and even a number of baptized Latin Christian Estonians, joined the Russians in their attack on Odenpeh, hoping to free themselves from the German yoke. So, 20,000 fighters are currently surrounding the fort of Odenpeh, which is being defended by a mixture of Sword Brothers, German archers and Ungannians. The siege lasted for seventeen days before a relieving German force of 3,000 men came to the assistance of Odenpeh.

Now, the twenty thousand strong Russian army had Odenpeh totally surrounded, had cut off supplies of food going into the fort, and had also managed to poison its water source, dropping the corpses of unfortunate pagan Estonians from the surrounding region into the water catchment which supplied the stronghold. The Russians had attempted to force their way into Odenpeh without success, taking heavy losses from the German catapult machines and German archers. Henry of Livonia reports that a local Estonian boy met the 3,000 strong German army coming to the aid of Odenpeh, and guided them to the site at dawn. The 3,000 Germans were horrified at the sight of the massive besieging army, but they made a valiant attempt to take on the 20,000 men. It didn't go well. The Germans were taking heavy losses, but they managed to push through the Russian lines to the fort, where the surviving Germans were admitted inside.

Now this was bad news for the people inside Odenpeh. Their supplies of food and water were critically low, and now, instead of being saved by the incoming German army, what remained of the army was now besieged with them inside Odenpeh, adding to the number of mouths to feed. Luckily for the Germans, the Russians were also feeling under the weather. Prior to the siege, the Russians had gone on a destructive rampage through the countryside, destroying food stores and crops, ensuring that no supplies were available to feed the Germans and their allies inside Odenpeh. This meant of course, as the siege dragged on, that the 20,000 strong Russian army also had nothing to eat. As William Urban states, and I quote, "the Germans were starving inside the castle and the Russians were starving outside," end quote. So everyone was hungry and the fort of Odenpeh was holding up nicely, with the siege, looking like it wasn't going to end any time soon.

So, time for a truce. After the extra German troops had been inside Odenpeh for three days, representatives from both sides met and it was agreed that the Germans could leave Odenpeh unhindered if they agreed to hand the fort over to the Russians and return to Livonia. This seemed like a good solution to the impasse, so the fort was surrendered to the Russians and the Germans made their way back to Livonia. William Urban reports in

his book "The Baltic Crusade" that Bishop Albert was keen for this peace treaty to be expanded and extended across all Livonia and Estonia, but unfortunately, the opposite occurred. The year of 1217 saw increased Russian aggression and expansion, not only in Estonia but also in Livonia. As Henry of Livonia states in his chronicle, and I quote, "In Bishop Albert's nineteenth year, 1217, the Livonians did not rest from the wars" end quote. Bishop Albert sent emissaries to Novgorod and into Estonia, but it seems that the last thing the Russians were interested in was peace. In the words of Henry of Livonia, the men who Bishop Albert approached with words of peace, and I quote, "cared neither for the Bishop's pleas, nor for peace with the Germans. They conspired with the Estonians and formed plans to crush the Germans and destroy the Livonian Church." End quote.

So it looks like Bishop Albert is going to need as many crusade volunteers as he can find to counter Russian aggression. Fortunately for Bishop Albert, and for the future existence of the Latin Christian Church in Livonia, Bishop Albert's recruitment drive to Saxony in 1217 was highly successful. One of the reasons why it was so successful was due to the ongoing battle between Bishop Valdemar and Gerhard of Oldenburg for the position of Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. The two wannabe Archbishops have been battling back and forth now for many years. For a while, Bishop Valdemar had looked to have the upper hand. He had allied himself with Emperor Otto IV and Otto's elder brother Henry V of Saxony, who had provided military and financial assistance to Bishop Valdemar for his bid to become Archbishop. Of course, this put Bishop Valdemar in opposition to Pope Innocent, who had excommunicated Emperor Otto and was himself supporting Valdemar's rival, Gerhard of Oldenburg. Things looked to take a turn for the worse for Team Valdemar after Otto's defeat in the Battle of Bouvines, but Bishop Valdemar was not one to go down without a fight. Despite the fact that his chief backer, Emperor Otto, had just lost the Imperial crown, Bishop Valdemar, with the assistance of Henry of Saxony, managed to capture the city of Hamburg. But not for long. In the winter of 1216, Bishop Valdemar's nephew, King Valdemar II of Denmark, recaptured Hamburg from his uncle.

While the Valdemars were battling over the city of Hamburg, Gerhard of Oldenburg was coming from behind with a shock move. Sensing an opportunity due to the demise of Bishop Valdemar's chief backer, Otto IV, Gerhard of Oldenburg made his move in 1216. A bunch of mercenaries who had been fighting for Bishop Valdemar switched sides and declared for Gerhard of Oldenburg, providing him with an opportunity to attack the city of Bremen, which had always been Bishop Valdemar's power base. By 1217 the city of Bremen had lost confidence in Bishop Valdemar and had declared for Gerhard of Oldenburg, a massive blow to Bishop Valdemar's cause.

So the state of play, when Bishop Albert arrived back in Saxony in 1217, was that Gerhard of Oldenburg was holding all the aces in the game of Archbishop poker. He had the support of Pope Innocent and King Valdemar II of Denmark, and critically also had to the support of the cities of Bremen and Hamburg. Bishop Valdemar has seen the writing on the wall, has fled the scene, and is currently seeking sanctuary in the Duke of Saxony's court. So Gerhard of Oldenburg is now the new undisputed Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. Woohoo! But there's one little problem: he's virtually bankrupt. The mercenaries he used to secure the city of Bremen had not come cheap, and the years of conflict with Bishop Valdemar had drained his coffers, until the victorious new Archbishop was virtually penniless. But oddly, this was really good news for Bishop Albert. The Pope is currently pressing Archbishop Gerhard to pay to Rome the required contribution of five percent of his income. Archbishop Gerhard, of course, doesn't have this money, so he is pressing the nobility of his new Archbishopric to cough up the funds. He's pressing them

so much, in fact, that suddenly a crusade to faraway Livonia is looking pretty tempting for many of them.

As a result, quite a few northern lords took the Cross during Bishop Albert's recruitment drive of 1217, and a bunch of not so well to do men also decided to join the Crusade. The papacy was in full blown Crusade mode at this point in time, and many people who had rashly made crusading oaths were now being pressured to make good on their vows. The Crusade to the Holy Land was a prestigious way to fulfill your crusading obligations, but it was also a time consuming and expensive way to take up the Cross. But look, nearby Livonia is calling for crusaders, as is Estonia via its Bishop Theodoric. You could pop on a boat sail from Lubeck to Gottland via Livonia, and be back in the Holy Roman Empire the following season, with your crusading vows conveniently fulfilled. So Bishop Albert's recruitment drive in 1217 bore quite a bit of fruit.

Now, among the noblemen of the Empire who decided to take the cross and travel back to Livonia with Bishop Albert was Count Albert of Orlamunde, the Count of Holstein. Now Count Albert of Orlamunde was a powerful and influential man, who had some time ago now made crusading vows. Pressure was currently coming from Rome for powerful and influential Latin Christian noblemen to make good on their crusading vows, and act as pious role models for their vassals.

Now there were currently a couple of Crusades up for grabs, which would provide an opportunity for Count Albert to fulfill his vows. The most high profile one was the Fifth Crusade, whose unfortunate participants were currently mustering, and were intending to retake Jerusalem by way of Egypt. Many of Count Albert's vassals had put up their hands to embark on this Crusade, and were currently in the final stages of preparing to depart. So, pressure was on Count Albert to come to the party and join his vassals on their trek to the Holy Land.

But Count Albert had other ideas. He had heard about the Livonian Crusade and that had piqued his interest. Why? Well, because Count Albert was the Count of Holstein, which was currently under occupation by the Danish Crown. So Count Albert sensed an opportunity to gain the favor of his overlord, King Valdemar II of Denmark, by going to Livonia instead of Egypt and checking out the situation in Livonia and Estonia, to see if it didn't hold some opportunities to advance the ambitions of both himself and the King of Denmark. But to be successful in this venture, he needed an army, and unfortunately all his vassals were about to head off to Egypt. That wouldn't do at all, so Count Albert sent a letter to Rome requesting permission for his vassals to fulfill their vows in Livonia instead of the Holy Land. Pope Honorius III, the successor to Pope Innocent who had died in Italy the previous year, granted the request. So Count Albert's vassals repacked their crusader bags, swapping warm clothes for the summery ones they had intended to take, and joined the impressively large number of crusaders departing from Lubeck in 1217.

Now, there is no record of how Bishop Albert felt about Count Albert joining the Crusade with his men. But Bishop Albert was a savvy operator who always seemed to have his fingers on the right pulse, so it's likely that he felt a little disquiet about this particular recruit. On the one hand, Bishop Albert needed all the men he could muster if he was going to retain Livonia for the Latin Christian Church, and take Estonia for Bishop Theodoric.

Bishop Albert was currently unaware of the situation back in Livonia, but it was really quite dire. Once again, the Russians and Estonians had joined forces, and the Prince of Novgorod and the Prince of Pskov were currently making plans to take their armies to Estonia, to join up with the 6,000 or so pagan Estonian fighters who were mustering in the borderlands between Estonian territory and that occupied by the Letts. So you would think that Bishop Albert would be welcoming every single Crusade volunteer with open arms. On the other hand, however, Bishop Albert knew that Count Albert was not only a powerful man, he was vassal to the King of Denmark. Bishop Albert had managed to keep the Danish Crown away from Livonia and Estonia to date, but with Count Albert fulfilling his crusader vows in Livonia, he was effectively acting as King Valdemar's foot in the Estonian door.

So we will leave Bishop Albert and Count Albert sailing to Gottland, blissfully unaware of the mustering Russian and Estonian forces which they will face off against when they reach their destination. Now, if you think this all spells dark days ahead for Bishop Albert, you would be right. In fact, if this podcast had a soundtrack, the musical accompaniment to the shiploads of crusaders sailing from Lubeck would be moody and gloomy. As we've seen, for nearly twenty years Bishop Albert has been adept at juggling a number of concerns: the ambitions of the Sword Brothers; Danish and Russian expansionism; the pagans; the recruitment of crusaders. He has managed to keep all these concerns spinning and turning up in the air without any of them tumbling down in ruin around his feet. Now, however, with Count Albert added into the mix, the juggling act is looking to become too complex for even Bishop Albert to manage.

Join me next week as the Crusaders clash with the combined Estonian and Russian armies, and Bishop Albert discovers that he would really prefer to be the only Albert in Livonia. Until next week, bye for now.

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