

History of the Crusades. Episode 223. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part V. The Teutonic Knights.

Hello again. Last week we saw Duke Konrad of Mazovia ask the Teutonic Order to send an army to Prussia to Christianize the local Prussians, in exchange for land in the region of Kulm. This move, which effectively outsourced the conquering of Prussia to forces outside Poland, was born of desperation. Years of attempted Christianization of Prussia by preaching and by crusading, had failed to yield any permanent results. So, really, if Bishop Christian wanted his Bishopric of Prussia to be full of Christian converts, all faithfully paying tithes to the church, this was the only means left available to achieve it. So we left last week's episode with members of the Teutonic Order journeying back to the Holy Roman Empire from Mazovia, bearing with them a formal offer from Duke Konrad, witnessed by Bishop Christian. The offer was made to the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order Hermann von Salza, and stated that the order would be provided with land inside Prussia if they provided military assistance, which was to be used to Christianize Prussia.

Now, before the members of the Teutonic Order arrive back in the Holy Roman Empire and hand the offer over to their Grand Master, we should take a look at how the Teutonic Order itself has been faring in recent times. We last examined the Order way back in Episode 193. In that episode, we saw how the Order was established in the Holy Land in the year 1198, originally to care for sick and injured German crusaders, and later to build and garrison castles in strategic locations in the Holy Land. Well, it's now the year 1226, so the Teutonic Order has been in existence for twenty eight years. So the question we need to ask is: What has happened to the Order during that time? As we pointed out in last week's episode, the history of the Teutonic Order really begins with the appointment of Hermann von Salza as its Grand Master in the year 1210. So let's take a look at the history of the Order from 1210 until the point we currently find ourselves in the timeline, the year 1226.

In his book "The Teutonic Knights, A Military History", William Urban describes Hermann von Salza as being an ambitious young man who was not quite of noble birth. Hermann von Salza wanted to make something of his life, but his parents had neither the wealth nor the influence required to propel him to success, either as a secular knight or within the Church. Knowing that his lack of connections would hamper his rise through the Church and through one of the older, more established, more prestigious military Orders, Hermann von Salza chose to join a new, smaller Order, the Teutonic Knights. This clearly was the right move to make. William Urban states that his abilities and talents stood out prominently within the small membership of the Teutonic Order, and Hermann von Salza rose rapidly through its ranks, eventually being elected Grand Master of the Order in the 1210, when he was only in his thirties.

His early years as Grand Master weren't particularly memorable. William Urban notes that he probably attended the famous Fourth Lateran Council in the year 1215, but he didn't speak publicly at the event, nor did he make any impression sufficient enough to land himself in the historical record. He joined the Fifth Crusade in 1217, only to suffer a military defeat in 1221, which saw the loss of Damietta and the death or imprisonment of most of the Crusader forces. Hermann von Salza was one of many crusaders taken prisoner and was ransomed back to the Holy Roman Empire. William Urban speculates that it was this experience which may have led Hermann von Salza to decide that the future of the Teutonic Order perhaps did not lie with crusades to the Holy Land.

And it was after this time that Hermann von Salza seemed to turn his attention and his energies to matters in Europe rather than the Middle East. He had formed a number of connections with influential nobleman from the Holy Roman Empire during the Fifth Crusade, and was highly regarded by the Emperor himself, Emperor Frederick II, who would eventually come to view Hermann von Salza as both a counselor, confidante and friend. With Pope Honorius III regarding Hermann Von Salza in a similar light, Hermann von Salza's star rose to dizzying heights in Europe, and the Order that he headed, the Teutonic Order, rose along with him.

Interestingly though, one of the defining events in the history of the Teutonic Order came about not because of Hermann von Salza's new connections, but because of his old family connections, and the origins of this event commenced well before the Fifth Crusade. As we have stated previously, Hermann von Salza was not quite of noble birth, but like many other families in this situation, the von Salzas had aspirations to climb higher. Their family patron, and the man after whom Hermann von Salza was probably named, was Count Hermann of Thuringia. Count Hermann of Thuringia was effectively the feudal overlord of the von Salza family. The Count was powerful and dynamic, and it's probably safe to say that if ever an opportunity presented itself to the von Salza family to come to the Count's attention, or even better to serve his interests, the von Salzas would have jumped at this opportunity.

Now it's likely that Count Hermann would have been well aware of Hermann von Salza's rise in influence, and around the same time as Hermann von Salza was elected as Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, Count Hermann was deep in negotiations with King Andrew II of Hungary. Why was Count Hermann deep in negotiations with the King of Hungary? Well, he was attempting to secure a promise of marriage between his own young son Louis, and King Andrew's four year old daughter Princess Elizabeth. Now this was quite an ambitious move on Count Hermann's part, and, well, if he could find a way to do a favor for King Andrew, that would smooth the way forward and make this favorable match more likely. So when King Andrew expressed his desire to go on the Fifth Crusade, and then lamented that he couldn't do so because of a bunch of pesky pagans, Count Hermann was all ears.

The problem was this. A warlike tribe of pagans from the region around the Black Sea, called the Cumans, had recently taken to crossing the Carpathian mountain range into the Hungarian region of Transylvania. Transylvania itself was only sparsely populated, mainly because it was mountainous and heavily forested, and most Hungarian settlers preferred living on the flatter, more fertile land of the Hungarian plains. But King Andrew was worried that these pagans may establish themselves in Transylvania, and then move down onto the plains, endangering his people. The obvious solution to this problem would be to set up defensive outposts in Transylvania to drive the pagans back over the mountains into their native lands, but the trouble for King Andrew was: no Hungarians really wanted to move to Transylvania. As a result, any outposts which were established were only sparsely garrisoned, and were easily overrun by the pagans.

Now King Andrew may have mentioned this problem to Count Hermann, and Count Hermann may well have mentioned that he had the perfect solution. One of his vassals just happened to be the new Grand Master of the Teutonic Order. Why not invite the Teutonic Knights to establish a base in Transylvania and let them take on the task of expelling the pagans from Hungary? And that's pretty much what happened. King Andrew of Hungary invited the Teutonic Knights to establish themselves in the region of

Transylvania called Burzenland. The order was promised land in Burzenland, and were provided with an exemption from the obligation to pay taxes and duties to the Hungarian Crown. This effectively meant that the Order could import peasants and settlers and establish them in Transylvania, and all the financial benefits of their rents and labor would flow directly into the coffers of the Order itself, and not into the treasury of the Kingdom of Hungary.

It's not difficult to see why Hermann von Salza accepted this offer. Not only was he doing a favor for his feudal overlord, it meant that the Teutonic Order had a chance to establish themselves in Europe, and drive pagans back into pagan lands into the bargain. So the offer was accepted, and a contingent of Teutonic Knights and a bunch of German peasants from the Holy Roman Empire made the journey to Burzenland, and built a series of wood and earth forts in various strategic locations across their new territory.

Now this all worked splendidly well, in the classic feudal manner. The safety and security provided by the forts meant that the peasants could spend all their time and energy clearing land and planting and tending crops, while the profits from this labor paid for the operation of the forts. Word of the success of the venture made its way back to Germany, and more peasants made the trek to Burzenland to try their luck farming in the Hungarian mountains. King Andrew, now satisfied that the pagan issue was being adequately addressed, finalized the marriage contract between his daughter and Count Hermann's son, and then made preparations to join the Fifth Crusade. So everything seems to be going well, but actually, there is a storm brewing on the horizon.

The King of Hungary and the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order are now both absent from Europe, and, without any way of contacting their Grand Master, the Teutonic Knights in Burzenland decided to take the initiative, and instead of acting in a purely defensive capacity against the raiding pagans, they started to go on the offensive. It's easy to see how this happened. The rudimentary forts defended the German peasants against the pagan invaders, and prevented them from advancing further into Hungary. But the Knights from the Teutonic Order now started driving the pagans back towards the Black Sea. This meant that they found themselves in new territory, new unoccupied territory. Without anyone to tell them otherwise, they decided that it wouldn't be outside the terms of their original charter to build defensive forts in these new lands, and bring some more German peasants in too, replicating the successful experiment which had begun in Burzenland. Once the peasants in these new regions started producing crops, the Order used this resource to improve their defenses, so that by the year 1220 they had managed to construct five castles, some of them built of stone. Of course, now they could use these castles as a base to push even further into the unoccupied lands being raided by the pagans.

As more and more German peasants began streaming in to populate the new region, I guess it would come as no surprise to anyone to learn that alarm bells started ringing amongst the Hungarian noble classes. Suddenly, to them the pagans weren't much of a problem, but these German occupiers were. To make matters worse, with the diplomatically astute Hermann von Salza still away on the Fifth Crusade and unable to be contacted, the Teutonic Knights in Hungary made some amateurish blunders. They failed to recognize the rights of some local Hungarian overlords who had traditionally exercised power over the region, and they also ignored the claims of the local Hungarian Bishop.

By the time King Andrew returned from the Fifth Crusade he was not a popular monarch. No one likes a loser, and the complete failure of the venture rankled with his subjects, as did the massive costs King Andrew had extracted from Hungary to fund the disastrous expedition. In fact, King Andrew became so unpopular that he was effectively Magna Carta'd by his people. He found himself endorsing a document called the Golden Bull, which was similar in nature to the document foisted on King John of England a few years earlier.

However, when faced with complaints about the Teutonic Knights, he refused to eject them from his Kingdom. He conceded that their actions exceeded the terms in the original charter, so he had another one drawn up. In his book "The Teutonic Knights", William Urban states that he can see Hermann von Salza's influence in this new charter, because it went much further than the original document. It specifically authorized the Order to construct permanent stone castles, and gave a tick of approval to the practice of importing German peasants to populate the regions occupied by the Knights.

Unsurprisingly, this did nothing to allay the concerns of the Hungarian nobility, and the unhappy noblemen in fact found themselves with an unlikely new ally, King Andrew's eldest son and heir, Prince Bela. Clearly, Prince Bela's vocal public opposition to the Teutonic Knights was going to be a problem once King Andrew died, so Hermann von Salza decided to do some behind the scenes wrangling to address the situation, a move which blew up spectacularly in his face. Hermann von Salza's solution to the problem was to have the regions populated by the Knights and the German peasants in Hungary placed under Papal protection, making the regions, in effect, fiefs of the Holy See.

This move caused King Andrew to make a policy back-flip. He immediately dropped all support for the Teutonic Knights and ordered them to leave his kingdom. Both Hermann von Salza and Pope Honorius attempted to intervene, but King Andrew would not be moved. The Teutonic Knights were then forcibly ejected from the Kingdom of Hungary. The German peasants remained behind, until they too were kicked off their land in the year 1945. Yes, you heard right. The German peasants remained in Hungary until the end of World War Two, when the descendants of those original settlers were ordered to leave.

The ramifications of the expulsion of the Order were that the pagans ended up once again menacing the Kingdom of Hungary, and importantly for us, it made Herman von Salza reluctant to volunteer his Order for service in regions outside the Holy Roman Empire, save, of course, for the Holy Land.

So this is what is playing on Hermann von Salza's mind as the contingent of Knights bearing the offer from Duke Konrad of Mazovia draws closer. Join me next week as home, and Von Salza ponders whether or not to accept the offer. Until next week, bye for now.

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