

History of the Crusades. Episode 227. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part IX. The Charter of Kulm.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Teutonic Order obtain clarification from the major stakeholders involved in the Christianization of Prussia, about the legal situation regarding the conquering of land in Prussia by the Order. Satisfied that the situation had been adequately addressed, the Order expanded their defenses over the Vistula River from Voglesang into pagan territory. By the year 1233, most of the area around the Prussian stronghold at Kulm had been Christianized, and a Crusade designed to bring the rest of Prussia under Christian control was about to commence.

Now the Crusade, which was launched into Prussia in the year 1233 was an impressively large one. In his book "The Prussian Crusade", William Urban reports that as many as 10,000 men took up the Cross against the pagans, a figure which would have been higher still had there not been a competing Crusade taking place in the Holy Roman Empire at the same time, against some pesky rebellious peasants. The reason why this Crusade was able to attract so many volunteers is a little unexpected. The Crusade had a draw card. Yes, a piece of the True Cross was carried into Prussia, presumably by the Dominican preachers who accompanied the expedition. Knowing that a military campaign fought under such an esteemed religious relic was bound to be a successful, knights and fighters from across the Holy Roman Empire and Poland gathered to join the Crusade.

The Crusade also attracted an impressive contingent of Polish noblemen. In fact, possibly too many Polish noblemen took the Cross. Not only Duke Konrad of Mazovia, but Duke Henryk of Silesia and Duke Wladislaw Odonic of Great Poland joined up, along with Archbishop Fulco of Gniezno. Since a civil war had recently been fought in Poland, with these Dukes on opposing sides, concerns were raised that tensions may get out of hand, so Hermann Balk obtained a Papal injunction confirming the fact that he was the leader of the Crusade, and requiring all participants to obey his instructions while they were fulfilling their crusading vows.

Pope Gregory IX also wrote to the pagan Prussians, urging them to surrender and inviting them to send a delegation of men to Rome, to discuss the best way to bring Christianity to the region. Unfortunately, of course, the pagans were unable to read, but even if they could have understood the words handed down by Rome, they most likely wouldn't have taken any notice of them. So the Crusade was on.

After numerous skirmishes and battles, the Crusaders managed to defeat most of the western region of Prussia and established a Christian base by constructing a stronghold at Marienwerder, in the middle of Pomesania, on a tributary of the Vistula River. A number of crusaders volunteered to stay at Marienwerder over the winter, and the stronghold was used as a base to push further into pagan territory.

From here on in, the Prussian Crusade developed a little differently to the Livonian Crusade. The bulk of the fighters involved in the Prussian Crusade were from Poland, with the number also from the Holy Roman Empire. With Prussia being so close to their homeland, however, the Polish and German fighters tended to return home for the winter. No one wants to stay in a cold, newly constructed fort in hostile lands during the wet, freezing winter months, when just a short journey away you could be back at home, safe in your warm bed, with plenty of food and ale to get you through the harsh weather. So, unlike the Livonian Crusade, the Crusaders from Poland and the Holy Roman Empire were

a bit like a tide. They all rushed in, did some conquering and stayed for a while, and then all rushed out again, with the seasons.

Everyone, that is, except the Teutonic Knights. The Knights of the Order had all taken vows of celibacy and poverty, and there wasn't much to tempt them back in the Holy Roman Empire. So they tended to stay in Prussia as a permanent presence, manning the castles over winter, monitoring pagan activity, and training the newly converted pagans to fight alongside the Christian forces. To assist in the full time occupation of the newly Christianized parts of Prussia, the Order installed secular knights, mainly from Poland, to settle and establish themselves on vacant land inside Prussia. William Urban points out that there weren't that many of these new permanent settlers, so the bulk of the permanent fighting force inside Prussia was comprised of newly converted Prussians, who had been baptized and had agreed to take up arms against their pagan countrymen.

Now, while Prussia is slowly being conquered, and while regular expeditions of crusaders are journeying to Prussia during the warmer months, we need to check in and see what has been happening to Bishop Christian. Now you would think that things would be going splendidly well for Bishop Christian. For many years now, he has been trying to Christianize his defiant Bishopric, and now it looks like it's finally happening. As he was legally entitled to two thirds of the land conquered by the Teutonic Order in Prussia, I imagine that you are picturing a beaming Bishop Christian touring his new lands, tending to his new flock, and collecting his new tithes and taxes. But unfortunately for Bishop Christian, he's not doing any of this. He had made the fateful decision to travel northwards into Samland, a region in Prussia which bordered the Baltic Sea. Hearing that the Prussians of Samland had decided to voluntarily accept Christianity, instead of waiting for it to be forced upon them, Bishop Christian had left the battlefield that was the western part of Prussia, and, taking a small military escort, he traveled to Samland.

Unfortunately, some of the new converts there were still grappling with the finer points of the Christian faith, and instead of welcoming Bishop Christian into their community, they killed his escorts and took him prisoner. In addition to struggling to come to terms with the fact that their new religion meant that they really shouldn't have killed their Bishop's companions, and taken the Bishop himself captive, the Prussians were also unaware of the widespread usage of the system of ransoming valuable captives. As a result, for a long time no one knew exactly what had happened to Bishop Christian, or whether he was alive or dead.

With no offers of ransom forthcoming from the Prussians, and no word at all coming out of northern Prussia as to the whereabouts of the Bishop of Prussia, or whether he was even alive, the Christianization of Prussia proceeded without him. In his book "The Prussian Crusade", William Urban points out that the kidnapping and imprisonment of Bishop Christian didn't really affect the Prussian Crusade at all. If the Prussians had intended to disrupt the Christianization of their lands by detaining Bishop Christian, well that didn't happen. In fact, William Urban points out that removing Bishop Christian from the scene may even have assisted the subjugation of Prussia, because instead of having to allocate Bishop Christian two thirds of the conquered lands, and instead of having disputes with the Bishop about which lands belonged to the Order and which to the Church, the Order just conquered everything they could, and kept all the land for themselves, without worrying about setting any aside.

So, without having to worry about the Bishop or the Church for the moment, Hermann Balk's program of Christianization was going pretty well. He decided that he would found one new town in Prussia every year, so, in chronological order, the towns of Thorn, Kulm and Marienwerder appeared in the years 1231, 1232 and 1233 respectively. He invited traders from the Holy Roman Empire to come in and settle in these new towns, and some merchants accepted the offer, meaning items such as cloth, iron and salt made their way into Prussia, while local goods such as grain, beeswax and furs were able to be exported. Interestingly, William Urban points out that the skilled fishermen who settled in the new towns in Prussia were amongst the most successful of the newcomers. Not only were the rivers and swamps teeming with fish and eels, the practice of the members of the Teutonic Order to exclude meat from their diets on numerous fast days and religious days, meant that there was a constant demand for their product.

In the year 1233, the Teutonic Knights enacted a document which set out the rights of the new settlers in Prussia, and the rights of the native Prussians. This document was called the Charter of Kulm, and was actually almost revolutionary in the way it set the basis for the new society. Scholars have spent countless hours over the years studying this document, and bucket-loads of ink has been spent describing in minute detail the rights and obligations set out in the Charter, and its effect on the emerging new state. Now, while it is a really interesting document, and it is really important, as it ended up being extended out from Kulm and expanded its operation to all of conquered Prussia, I'm not going to go into it in a huge amount of detail.

All we really need to know is that the document enshrined the rights granted to the Teutonic Order under the Golden Bull of Rimini, and granted to the Order, the sole right to create Prussia's foreign policy, to conduct war, to collect taxes, and to administer justice. To the new immigrants to Prussia, it set out clearly their property rights and their obligation to pay taxes. As the rate of taxes was set under the charter, and as the charter provided new settlers with not only rights over their properties, but rights to travel, to be able to buy and sell goods, and to be able to elect their representatives, it meant that new settlers to Prussia actually had more rights in Prussia than they had back in Poland or in the Holy Roman Empire. Native Prussians were taxed differently. Actually, they were taxed less than the newcomers, but they were obliged to work in the Order's fields, and on building fortifications for the Order, an obligation which wasn't imposed on the immigrants.

So in summary, the Charter of Kulm laid out the basis for the establishment of the new state of Prussia, creating a society that deviated from the type of feudal structure operating elsewhere in Europe. Although it was still feudal in nature, it was better organized and more structured than other European states, and the power at the top of the feudal pyramid lay, of course, not with a king or emperor, but with the Teutonic Order.

So with the Teutonic Order busy in the west of Prussia, making Christian converts, establishing new towns and settlements, and imposing their Charter on immigrants and locals alike, and with Bishop Christian being held somewhere in Northern Prussia against his will, we will leave the Prussian Crusade there for a bit. Why? Well, for two reasons.

Firstly, because the spotlight in general in Europe is about to swing away from Prussia towards various areas of conflict. The civil war in Poland is about to flare up again, and there will also be civil unrest in the Holy Roman Empire, caused by a rebellion started by Emperor Frederick's son and heir. Oh, and you know how the Polish dukes moved into a neighboring Russian province to fill the power vacuum created when the Mongols killed

the Russian nobility following their victory in the Battle of Kalka River? Well, things are about to heat up there, too. Everyone knew that the Mongols would return at some stage and follow up on their victory at Kalka River, and that time is fast approaching, so the attention of central Europe's fighting men will be drawn away from Prussia into other arenas. While that is taking place, we're going to take the opportunity to return to the Livonian Crusade.

Ten years or more have passed since we left a Bishop Albert, the Sword Brothers, and the Livonians, Letts and Estonians, and it's about time we checked in on them to see how they have been faring. I guess it won't come as too much of a surprise to you to learn that, for some of the players at least, things haven't been going very well at all. So join me next week as we leave the Prussian Crusade for the time being, and once again take up the story of the Livonian Crusade. Until next week, bye for now.

End