

History of the Crusades. Episode 232. The Baltic Crusades. The Crusade to Novgorod.

Hello again. Last week we saw the end of the Sword Brothers, as the Order was absorbed into the ranks of the Teutonic Knights. We also saw the two parties with competing claims to Estonia, King Valdemar II of Denmark and the Teutonic Order, sign a treaty in the year 1238 which gave one of the regions formerly administered by the Sword Brothers, the region of Jerwan, to the Teutonic Order, leaving the rest of Estonia for Denmark. Not everyone was happy about this arrangement, particularly many of the German noblemen who had settled in Estonia and now found themselves being ruled by King Valdemar, but William of Modena had a nice distraction lined up for them all, a distraction which would make the fighting men of Estonia put aside their petty quarrels and unite behind a single cause. What was that single cause? Well it was a Crusade to Novgorod.

Now, some of you at this stage may be scratching their heads and thinking “Wait on, aren’t the Russians Christians, and if so, isn’t a crusade against Christians not so much of a thing when there are still pagans in Prussia and Lithuania who need subduing?” Well, I have three words for you in response: The Fourth Crusade. Yes, just over thirty years ago the Orthodox city of Constantinople had been the subject of a Crusade, and had been sacked and brought under Latin Christian rule. Constantinople was currently still under Latin Christian control, and since the fall of Constantinople in 1204 the western Papacy had been attempting to impose Latin Christianity on all the eastern Christian Churches. This included not just the Greek Orthodox Churches of the Byzantine Empire, but the Russian Orthodox Churches in the Russian Principalities.

Most of the conflict between the Latin Christians and the Russian Orthodox Christians to date had just involved isolated skirmishes in the border regions of Estonia, but in more recent times the Prince of Novgorod, Prince Yaroslav V, had been growing a little troublesome, interfering with Latin Christian missionary activities in Finland, and invading the eastern Estonian town of Dorpat. So, (to) William of Modena, who was enforcing Papal rule in Livonia and Estonia, and trying to find a distraction for the warring and quarrelsome Latin Christians of Estonia, a crusade against Novgorod looked like it might solve a lot of problems. It would unite the Latin Christians against a common cause, it would teach the Princes of Novgorod not to meddle in Latin Christian affairs, and it might even result in the Papacy claiming for its own the important trading center, and seat of power for the Prince of Novgorod, the city of Novgorod itself. In the same way as a new Latin Christian Imperial system was currently administering the city of Constantinople, maybe the whole of the Principality of Novgorod could be a seat of Latin Christian power, meaning that the Latin Christians would exert a degree of control over trade into Russia. It may then provide a stepping stone for further Latin Christian expansion into the other Orthodox Christian Principalities.

And actually it was quite a good time to be launching a military campaign into Russia. Much of the region was still reeling from the Mongol invasions. Following the brief respite after their victory in the Battle of Kalka River, the Mongols had repeatedly raided into the Russian Principalities, and no-one seemed to be able to stop them. By the time the Crusade to Novgorod commenced, the Principality of Novgorod was one of the few regions in Russia untouched by the Mongol invasions. The attentions of the current Prince of Novgorod, Prince Alexander, were pretty much focused solely on the Mongol threat until the summer of the year 1241 when, for reasons unknown to the Russians, the Mongols turned away from the Principality of Novgorod, and turned their attentions elsewhere. This meant that, at last, the Prince of Novgorod was able to focus on this new threat to his frontier, the Crusaders.

So, who were these Crusaders? Well, we've already established that many fighting men from Estonia put up their hands to join the expedition. The ex-Sword Brothers, now Teutonic Knights, were interested, as were the actual Teutonic Knights, as well as local Danish and German fighters. However the recruitment for the crusade didn't come solely from within Livonia and Estonia. The Count of Holstein from the Holy Roman Empire volunteered to take the Cross to Novgorod, as did a number of other merchant families and noblemen from the Holy Roman Empire, who, in addition to their pious goal of bring Latin Christianity to the Russians also may have had more worldly motivations, centering around the lucrative Russian trading markets. There were also a bunch of crusaders from Sweden. William of Modena's "time out" in the Scandinavian kingdoms seems to have resulted in a number of contacts being formulated between himself and the ruling families in the region. Swedish crusaders had been active in Finland and had, on occasion, pushed towards the northern borders of Novgorod, so a crusade to the region had piqued their interest.

Unexpectedly, another source of recruitment for the Crusade to Novgorod was the Russian Principality of Pskov. Having fought valiantly against the Latin Christians in the early years of the crusade in Livonia and Estonia, some political factions within Pskov had begun gravitating towards the new Western settlers in their region, and their alliance with the Latin Christians was cemented when Bishop Albert's brother Theodoric married into the ruling family in Pskov. Not surprisingly, ties between Pskov and Riga strengthened after this time, and occasionally Theodoric's relatives from Pskov would journey to Riga to escape factional fighting in their city, and some of them were even employed in administrative positions in Livonia, which they performed until things had quietened down enough for them to return back home. Increasingly Latin Christian fighting men had been employed by the ruling family in Pskov, so perhaps it's not too surprising that when they heard about a Crusade to one of their neighboring Principalities, some fighting men from Pskov volunteered to join. Others, however, railed against the German-loving faction of rulers in Pskov, and vowed not only to stay out of the Crusade but to take up arms against the Latin Christian-allied factions within

the ruling class in Pskov.

So, with all regional politics now taking a back seat to William of Modena's Crusade to Novgorod, let's see how it all panned out. It started off with a pretty good plan. Phase one of the Crusade to Novgorod was to be led by Sweden, and the idea was for the Swedes to sail in from the north and seize the town of Ladoga. This was a good idea, because if Ladoga was in Swedish hands they could control and blockade the river leading from Novgorod to Lake Ladoga, effectively placing a stranglehold on the trading city of Novgorod, which was dependent on river traffic for its livelihood.

So in the summer of the year 1240 the Swedes sailed down from the Baltic Sea into the River Neva, the river which ran from the Baltic Sea past the future site of the city of Saint Petersburg into Lake Ladoga. But Prince Alexander, the Prince of Novgorod, raced in to block Sweden's attempt to stranglehold his Principality. Prince Alexander confronted the Swedish forces while they were traveling along the River Neva and defeated them conclusively and resoundingly. Here's a summary of the event by a Russian chronicler, and I quote: "The Swedes came with their ruler and with their bishops and halted in the Neva, wishing to take possession of Ladoga or, in one word, of Novgorod and of the whole Novgorod province. But again, the most kind and merciful God, lover of men, preserved and protected us from the foreigners, since they labored in vain and without the command of God. For the news came to Novgorod that the Swedes were going towards Ladoga, and Prince Alexander, with the men of Novgorod and of Ladoga, did not delay at all. He went against them and defeated them by the power of Saint Sophia and the prayers of our sovereign Lady, the Holy Mother of God and eternally virgin Mary, on the fifteenth day of July 1240, and there was a great slaughter of Swedes." End quote. So comprehensive and impressive was Prince Alexander's victory over the Swedes that he incorporated the River Neva into his name from that time on, and he is known to history today as Prince Alexander Nevsky. But Prince Alexander Nevsky shouldn't bask in his glorious victory for too long, because another threat is on the horizon.

The second phase of the Crusade against Novgorod involved a land invasion of the Principality by the combined German, Danish, Estonian and Teutonic forces. In September of the year 1240 the crusaders marched to Pskov, determined to remove the anti-German power brokers within the ruling family, and intending to install pro-German Prince Yaroslav, who had been living in Riga in exile, on the throne. By the end of the year 1240 they had forced Pskov to surrender and were preparing to march into the neighboring Principality of Novgorod. In early 1241 they did exactly that, managing to occupy parts of the Principality between the city of Novgorod and the Gulf of Finland. But then things started to go wrong.

The first thing to go wrong was the death back in Denmark of King Valdemar II. Having left no

clear plans for his succession, a civil war looked likely to erupt in Denmark, so the Danish contingent of the Crusaders packed up and headed back to their homeland. Around the same time the Mongols, who had been threatening to invade the Principality of Novgorod to the east, swung away and turned their attentions elsewhere, leaving Prince Alexander Nevsky free to focus all his resources and attentions on the invading Latin Christians.

He focused his attention firstly on securing the border between his Principality and neighboring Estonia, driving out the garrisons which had been put in place by the crusaders to guard their recent conquests. Having secured the border regions he then moved southwards to Pskov. Here's what happened, according to the First Novgorod Chronicle, and I quote: "Prince Alexander occupied all the roads right up to Pskov, and he cleared Pskov, seized the Germans and Estonians, bound them in chains, and sent them to be imprisoned in Novgorod. And he himself went against the Estonians. And when they came to their land, he let loose his whole force to provide for themselves, and the Prince turned back to the lake, and the Germans and Estonians went after them. Seeing this Prince Alexander and all the men of Novgorod drew up their forces by the lake at Uzmen, by the Raven's Rock, and the Germans and Estonians rode at them, driving themselves like a wedge through their army. And there was a great slaughter of Germans and Estonians." End quote.

Now, this battle, dear listeners, has become known to history as the Battle on the Ice. The lake mentioned in this chronicle was Lake Peipus, and despite the fact that it was in fact spring when the forces from Novgorod clashed with the Crusaders, the lake was frozen solid, and the battle was fought on the frozen surface on the lake. This unique battle surface has caught the imagination of various people over the centuries, most notably in a film called "Alexander Nevsky" which was created by Soviet film-maker Sergei Eisenstein in the year 1938. Unfortunately, the film isn't notable for its historical accuracy. For example, the Teutonic Knights depicted in the film were depicted wearing World War One helmets. As a result of the inaccuracies in the film many myths about the Battle on the Ice, including the myth that the ice broke on the lake, dramatically drowning a bunch of Germans, have arisen and persisted due to the cinematic depiction of the battle in the film.

What definitely did happen, though, was that Prince Alexander and his army from Novgorod fought and resoundingly defeated the Crusader forces when they battled on the ice of Lake Peipus in April 1241. The most likely reason behind the comprehensive victory was the lack of manpower on the Crusader side of the battle. The Livonian Rhyme Chronicler reported at the time that the Teutonic Order had only allocated two of their Knights to garrison the city of Pskov after it surrendered to the Crusaders, and the Chronicle also states that during the Battle on the Ice the Crusader forces were outnumbered by Prince Alexander's forces sixty to one. This is likely to be an exaggeration. In his book "The Baltic Crusade," William Urban estimates the actual numbers at the battle to be around 2,000 Crusaders and around 6,000

Russians, but still, clearly, the numbers were against the Crusaders.

Following their defeat at Lake Peipus, the Crusader push to Novgorod was abandoned, and Prince Alexander proceeded to force the invaders back over his borders, eventually offering peace terms to the Crusaders, which they accepted. So, that's it for the failed Crusade to Novgorod.

And that's it in fact for the Baltic Crusades for a while. Why? Well, because school's out for the summer and I'm about to take my annual break. But rest assured that I will be back and returning to the Baltics in late February 2018.

If you don't think you can wait that long for more podcast goodness, the good news is that our feed on Patreon will continue as usual throughout the summer. Yes, I will be dragging myself off the beach and releasing my usual fortnightly episodes on Patreon, so those episodes won't be taking a break. Why? Well because my lovely subscribers on Patreon are effectively my employers, and I want to make sure my employers stay happy. The good news is, if you can spare \$1 per month, you can also become my employer, and partake in the rewards, getting a bonus episode every fortnight. We are currently twenty episodes into a lengthy series on Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years War. If you are interested in signing up, but you don't want to land in the middle of a series, don't worry. Your \$1 donation will give you access to all the past episodes, so you can feast on all the lead-up episodes to Joan of Arc, and browse through the back catalog as well.

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So now, all that remains is for me to wish you and yours a very merry Christmas, or if Christmas isn't your thing, I wish you happiness and good health as we bring the year 2017 to

a close. So, until February 2018, bye for now.  
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