

History of the Crusades. Episode 233. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part X. Bishop Christian.

Hello again listeners, and welcome to another year of crusading. If you stretch your mind way back into the final weeks of 2017 you may recall that in our last episode the Teutonic Knights, along with a bunch of crusaders from Livonia, Estonia, The Holy Roman Empire, Sweden and Denmark, headed eastwards into Russia on a Crusade to Novgorod. The crusade was unsuccessful, with the Crusaders being resoundingly defeated by the Russians, due mainly to the heroic efforts of Prince Alexander Nevsky of Novgorod. Now, the Crusade to Novgorod occurred in the early years of the 1240s, and you may be interested, and probably not surprised, to learn that some pretty major events took place in Livonia, Estonia and Prussia in the late 1230s and early 1240s, which we need to catch up on.

So we need to sit back, take a breath, and take a bit of a look around us at the state of central and eastern Europe in the late 1230s and the early 1240s. What you would be looking at if you did this was a chaotic, violent and complicated mess. Civil wars had broken out, or were on the verge of breaking out, in Poland, the Holy Roman Empire and Denmark. The Papacy was also in conflict with the Holy Roman Empire, which shouldn't surprise anyone, but this of course added an extra layer of complication to the political situation at the time. Things were so messy and so complicated in fact that you could probably do an entire podcast series on the internal strife and cut-throat politics taking place in Europe at this time, but we won't be going into a huge amount of detail. We'll just deal with the conflicts as we need to within the context of the different Crusades taking place.

If you would like some more detail however, on what's going on in Poland at this time, I recommend that you head over to the History of Poland Podcast. The podcast started last year with the reign of Mieszko I, and the creator of the show, Trevor Gilbert, has been doing a great job covering the events taking place in medieval Poland. He's not up to the 1230s yet, but he's sure to get there at some stage, so check out the History of Poland podcast for all your Polish history needs.

OK now, before we start delving into the chaotic mess of European politics in the 1230s and 1240s, there's one matter we need to deal with before we go any further. Yes, I know you've been losing sleep over the past couple of months, tossing and turning at night, unable to get on with the business of your everyday lives, all because of one burning question: What happened to Bishop Christian of Prussia?

Yes, we left Bishop Christian of Prussia back in Episode 227, when he had celebrated the commencement of the Prussian Crusade by getting himself captured by a bunch of pagan

Prussians in Samland, Prussians who, unfortunately for Bishop Christian, were unaware of the custom of ransoming valuable prisoners. Now, just to do a quick recap, The Prussian Crusade looked like it was going to be a smashing success for Bishop Christian. Keen to emulate Bishop Albert's tactics in Livonia, of keeping the Crusading Orders under his thumb as much as possible, Bishop Christian had managed to negotiate an agreement with the Teutonic Knights whereby Bishop Christian would get two thirds of all the land conquered by the Knights in Prussia, while the Order would keep the remaining one third for themselves. Bishop Christian, however, was captured by the Prussian pagans in an isolated region of Prussia, to the north, in the year 1233, and with no word coming out of Prussia as to his state of health or of his whereabouts, everyone assumed that he had been killed, so the conquering of the western regions of Prussia continued without him, with the Teutonic Order conveniently forgetting about the agreement they had made over the division of lands, all of which they kept for themselves.

So what happened to Bishop Christian? Well, it took him more than four years, but he did manage to educate his captors about the intricacies of hostage negotiations and ransoms, so by the end of the year 1237 or the beginning of 1238, he successfully negotiated his release. The terms were as follows: Bishop Christian would pay to the pagans the sum of 800 marks to secure his freedom. The money was to be raised by fines he intended to levy on merchants who, he had discovered during his years in captivity, had illegally been selling iron, salt and other goods to the pagans. But the pagans weren't born yesterday. They weren't going to release Bishop Christian on the promise that he would levy taxes and then send 800 marks in their direction. No, the savvy pagans demanded that Bishop Christian's brother and nephew both be left in the pagans' care as hostages until the ransom was fully paid. So Bishop Christian was free. Woohoo!

He no doubt eagerly made his way back to the men of the Church, expecting reports that vast swathes of Prussia had been Christianized, and that two thirds of those vast swathes were now bringing income and converts for his Bishopric. Needless to say, Bishop Christian was about to be disappointed. Very disappointed. He discovered, to his horror, that the Teutonic Knights had kept 100% of the lands they had conquered, for themselves. Even land which had previously been securely in the hands of the Prussian Church was now apparently being overseen by the Teutonic Order. To make matters worse, Bishop Christian's own modest band of crusading knights had been incorporated into the Teutonic Order, and his allies within Prussia, the Cistercians, had vanished, and had been replaced by a bunch of Dominican friars.

The bad news kept coming. When he returned to his castle, Bishop Christian found it garrisoned by Teutonic Knights, and he discovered that the small trickle of income which had

been generated by the Church's holdings in Prussia had been redirected into the military coffers of the Teutonic Order. Bishop Christian's policy of conquering Prussia by going forth, speaking to the pagans, and convincing them by persuasive arguments to become Christians, a policy which admittedly hadn't gone very well for him during the past few years, had been upended, and now the only policy being applied in Prussia was one of military might and conversion by force. As William Urban neatly summarized in his book "The Prussian Crusade", and I quote "Bishop Christian was very annoyed to see what had happened to his diocese in his absence." End quote.

So, did Bishop Christian throw his hands in the air and submit to the dominance of the Teutonic Order? No, he didn't. Slowly but surely Bishop Christian started to push back. The Teutonic Order had nominated three Dominicans to be elevated to the position of Bishop, so Bishop Christian blocked all three of the appointments. He went through the accounts of the Church in Prussia, and demanded answers from the Order as to where all the Church's income had gone, and in some cases where it was clear that the money ought to have stayed in Church coffers, and not made its way into the military fund of the Teutonic Order, he demanded that the money be repaid. It was clear to Bishop Christian that just about all the money that was redirected away from the Church had gone to fund the military activities of the Order.

And in fact, it's easy to see why the Teutonic Knights were in desperate need of this extra injection of cash. The eyes of the Teutonic Knights at this point in time were not focused solely on Prussia. They were busy planning ambitious campaigns in Novgorod and Lithuania, and were trying to get their heads around sorting through the mess they had inherited from the incorporation of the Sword Brothers into their ranks in Livonia and Estonia. On top of this they also had obligations to Knights of the Order stationed in the Holy Roman Empire and the Holy Land. But wait there's more.

Not only were the Teutonic Knights spread thinly across these regions, they were also going on the offensive again in Prussia. Hermann Balk, as we all know, had moved to Livonia to supervise the Order's activities in this new arena, and in his absence a German Knight had been elevated to the position of Master of the Order in Prussia. The name of this new Prussian Master was Poppo von Osternach. Master Poppo was keen to continue the offensive campaigns started by Hermann Balk, and although the number of crusaders traveling to Prussia from Poland was much reduced due to the civil war, the Holy Roman Empire was still supplying the odd bunch of volunteer fighters, and Master Poppo made good use of them, pushing the boundaries of Christian Prussia further into pagan lands, and building castles to hold these new conquests.

So, by the end of the 1230's, that was the situation as regards the Prussian Crusade. Master Poppo and the Teutonic Order required every penny they could lay their hands on to finance the military campaign and the castle building extravaganza taking place in Prussia, along with, of course, the Order's other activities to the east in Livonia, Estonia, Lithuania and Russia, while Bishop Christian was intent on clawing back a significant portion of the funds coming out of Prussia so he could redirect them into his own coffers, the place where legally they were actually meant to be.

So, it looks like a major conflict is brewing between Bishop Christian and Master Poppo. This conflict was heightened when, faced with demands by Bishop Christian to repay a particular sum of money, Master Poppo refused. Bishop Christian responded by placing the entire Teutonic Order under the ban of excommunication. So it looks like things are getting a little out of hand. If there's something wrong in the central and eastern European ecclesiastical neighborhood, who ya gonna call? William of Modena.

Yes, for some years now, poor William of Modena had been the go-to man when the Papacy wanted to smooth out conflicts which had the potential to harm Church interests. So in the year 1239 William of Modena was dispatched to Prussia to put a lid on the simmering tensions between Master Poppo and Bishop Christian.

William of Modena brought both men together to mediate their dispute, and he finally managed to bring them both to an agreement. Bishop Christian's move to block the elevation of further Bishops in Prussia was upheld, meaning that Bishop Christian would be the sole Bishop operating in the region. However, most of the expenses incurred in conquering Prussia for the Church, and holding those conquests, were being borne by the Order, so William of Modena stipulated that only one third of the lands in Prussia would now fall under Bishop Christian's control, with the Teutonic Order retaining two thirds of the conquests. This, in effect, reversed the original agreement which had been negotiated by Bishop Christian prior to his captivity.

Needless to say, Bishop Christian was not at all happy about this new arrangement, and in an attempt to rein in the ambitions and power of the Teutonic Order in the same manner as Bishop Albert had managed to do with the Sword Brothers in Livonia, Bishop Christian wrote directly to Pope Gregory IX, raising concerns that, if Bishop Christian were unable to excommunicate the Order or to have a degree of oversight into their dealings in Prussia, then this was a severe limitation of Church authority, and would see a Bishop of the Church effectively subordinated to a military Order.

Bishop Christian's letter must have been persuasive, because he emerged victorious, with

Pope Gregory directing the Bishop of Meissen to ensure that all Bishop Christian's complaints were adequately addressed. In his book "The Prussian Crusade" William Urban points out that Bishop Christian likely tapped into the anti-German sentiment which was brewing around the Papacy at this time. Pope Gregory's dispute with the Holy Roman Emperor had reached new heights by the end of the 1230s, and he was beginning to frown upon all things German. However he held off on punishing the Teutonic Order, stating that he needed to examine Bishop Christian's complaints more carefully before taking any action.

Luckily for the Teutonic Order, and unluckily for Bishop Christian, Pope Gregory died in the year 1241, before making any pronouncements on the matter, and Pope Gregory's successor, Pope Innocent IV, didn't take office until 1243. By that time the legal powers which would have enabled Bishop Christian to obtain rights over lands and income in Prussia had lapsed, meaning that Bishop Christian was left empty-handed once again, with the Teutonic Order retaining possession of all the disputed lands in Prussia. Unsurprisingly, this whole "reach an agreement then go complaining to the Pope behind everyone's backs, only to have this course of action blow up in your face" debacle by Bishop Christian, put William of Modena off side.

Personality clashes aside, it's clear that Bishop Christian was faced with a tough situation in Prussia, one probably worse than that previously faced by Bishop Albert in Riga. It had taken all of Bishop's Albert's seemingly limitless energy and skills to keep the Sword Brothers in check, and in William of Modena's view Bishop Christian just wasn't up to the job of being Bishop of Prussia. So, in a stunning blow to Bishop Christian and the decades of hard work he had invested in his diocese, William of Modena ordered that Prussia be divided into four separate Bishoprics, those Bishoprics being Kulm, Pomesania, Warmia (or Ermland) and Samland. Bishop Christian was advised that he could choose only one of these new Bishoprics for himself. Pope Innocent, who was bogged down in the conflict with Emperor Frederick II, which he had inherited from Pope Gregory, immediately accepted William of Modena's recommendations, and formally endorsed the plan.

Unsurprisingly, Bishop Christian was outraged. He wrote a lengthy plea to Pope Innocent, listing the documents that had previously granted him rights over all of Prussia, and then decided to top this off by acting as if he was still the sole Bishop of all of Prussia. These actions didn't exactly endear Bishop Christian to Pope Innocent, who promptly decreed that the splitting of Prussia into four separate Bishoprics should commence immediately. This proved to be all too much for Bishop Christian, who died shortly afterwards, in the year 1244.

So, Bishop Christian has exited the stage, Prussia is about to be divided into four separate Bishoprics, and the Teutonic Knights has pretty much emerged as the undisputed

powerhouse of Christian Prussia. Join me next week as the new Bishops are appointed and settle into their new positions. Just in time too, as war is on the horizon for the Christians of Prussia. Until next week, bye for now.

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