

History of the Crusades. Episode 235. The Baltic Crusades. The Mongol Invasions.

Hello again. Last week we took a look at the four Prussian Bishoprics, and we also saw the Teutonic Knights tested by a major uprising, when Duke Swietopelk of neighboring Pomerelia in the north joined with the native Prussians to attempt to eject the Teutonic Order from Prussia. This uprising, which incidentally is known to history as the First Prussian Insurrection, was ultimately unsuccessful, but for a while it looked like it could go either way.

In fact, you may be thinking “Why didn’t some of the other Polish Dukes provide military support to Duke Swietopelk?” Surely it would be in Polish interests to see the Teutonic Knights ejected from Prussia? The Kingdom of Poland, after all, controlled the region to the west of Prussia and to the south of Prussia. Wouldn’t it be better for everyone if Poland could somehow extend its influence across Prussia as well? Well, I’m sure the Piast rulers of Poland would love to have seen this happen, and I’m sure that, if they had men available, they may well have gone to Duke Swietopelk’s assistance, but the fact was they didn’t have any men available. And this wasn’t due to the ongoing civil war. No, something much worse than civil war was about to descend on Poland, because the Mongols were coming.

Remember how Prince Alexander Nevsky of Novgorod was suddenly free to turn his attention to the Crusaders, because the Mongols inexplicably turned away from Novgorod and directed their attentions elsewhere? Well, that was terrific for Alexander Nevsky, who was able to concentrate on defeating the Crusaders and driving them out of Russia, but it wasn’t so great for the regions about to experience their own Mongol invasion. In this episode, if you haven’t guessed already, we will be taking time out from the Crusades to examine the Mongol invasions into eastern Europe.

Now, technically the Mongol invasions had no direct impact on the Baltic Crusades, but they are an important background event, and besides, who doesn’t want to know about the horsemen from the steppe regions pushing all the way into Latin Christendom? If that’s not an interesting event, I don’t know what is, so here we go.

Now, the Mongols at this stage in history were on a bit of a roll. The Mongol armies seemed endless and were thundering across China, parts of Russia, and the Middle East. The Mongols first came to the notice of many Europeans after their victory at the Battle of Kalka River in the year 1222, and word of their tireless attacking methods, the stamina of the Mongols and their horses, and the brutality dealt to those who dared to defy them, must have given quite a few eastern Europeans some sleepless nights. Well their attacks of insomnia would have worsened in the late 1230s as rumors spread of a major Mongol invasion into the Russian Principalities, then the nightmare became real in the year 1241, as the Mongols

battered down the door of Poland itself. Here's how it all panned out.

Having withdrawn from the Principality of Novgorod, the Mongols concentrated their efforts on the southern Russian Principalities, the Principality of Kiev, also known as Kievan Rus, in particular. This turned out to be a wise move. By the year 1240 they had actually managed to conquer all of Kievan Rus, with the massively important trading center, the city of Kiev, succumbing to the invaders in the year 1240. How did the Mongols manage to conquer such a large area in such a short time? Well, by using the tactics which had always served them so successfully. Those tactics were: by being lenient to those who surrendered and being gob-smackingly brutal to those who dared defy them. Once a region was taken the Mongols would recruit the fighting men of the region into their forces, meaning that they had a fresh bunch of soldiers equipped with local knowledge to bolster the Mongol army. This reduced the need for the Mongols to transport large standing armies to fields of conflict. If an army was required in a region controlled by the Mongols, it could be raised and then disbanded just as easily by calling on local fighters to serve.

How did the Mongols convince the conquered fighting men to join their ranks? Well, by threatening to torture and kill the families of the fighting men if they failed to comply. And the men of Kievan Rus, just like the men in every other region conquered by the Mongols, quickly learnt that the Mongols did not make idle threats. If the Mongols said they would torture and kill your family if you didn't immediately join their army with all the enthusiasm and eagerness you could muster, then, if you hesitated even for just a minute, be prepared to stand by while your family were tortured and murdered. Then be prepared to join the army anyway or be killed yourself. In this way the Mongol army moved steadily across Kievan Rus, conquering and recruiting as they went until, with the fall of the capital city of Kiev in 1240, the region was in Mongol hands. In fact, just to give you a rather sobering piece of information, the region formerly known as Kievan Rus will remain part of the Mongol empire for the next two and a half centuries.

And just when the Russians thought that things couldn't possibly get any worse, the Lithuanians decided to take this opportunity to push eastwards and invade the Russian Principality which sat adjacent to Lithuanian lands, the Principality of Polotsk.

Now, the Lithuanians had been feeling the heat a bit in recent times. The defiantly pagan Lithuanian people found themselves hemmed in by their Russian Orthodox neighbors to the east, while Latin Christian crusaders had settled in Livonia, to the north of Lithuania. The Latin Christians were constantly trying to convert the Lithuanians on the border lands, and were threatening to invade Lithuania and Christianize it. Lithuania's only other neighbor was Prussia, and now that looked like it had been overrun by Latin Christians as well. So with all

this in mind I guess it shouldn't come as too much of a surprise to learn that the Lithuanians decided to take full advantage of the Mongols pouring into Russia from the east by themselves pushing into Russia from the west. This actually worked to everyone's benefit in the short term. Many of the towns in Polotsk, terrified by the Mongol threat, didn't put up a huge resistance to the invading Lithuanians, perhaps hoping that the Lithuanians could assist them to beat back the Mongols from their lands, with the result that, in the short term at least, the Lithuanians won booty and land for themselves, and the people of Polotsk won a short reprieve from the Mongol invasions. And yes, it was only a short reprieve, as eventually the Mongols will sweep the Lithuanians from Polotsk and take it for themselves.

Now, remember the Cumans? It was quite a while back, so I'll refresh your memory. They were a bunch of war-loving pagans who kept raiding over the Carpathian Mountains into the Kingdom of Hungary, and had proven to be such a nuisance that King Andrew II of Hungary dispatched the Teutonic Knights to try to drive them back from Hungarian borders. Now, interestingly, the Cumans were similar in many ways to the Mongols. The Cumans were essentially nomadic warriors from the Eurasian steppe region, who occupied an area of land to the east of the Kingdom of Hungary and to the north of the Black Sea, a region that, at this point in time, was unsurprisingly known as Cumania.

Now, because the Cumans were nomadic, Cumania didn't have any set borders, but it was actually huge. If you want to see just how huge, Google "Cuman Federation in the year 1200", and you'll be taken to a quite gob-smacking map. Actually, you could also search under the alternate name for the Cumans, the Kipchak Turks, but either way you should discover that the region under Cuman or Kipchak control stretched all the way from where the Danube River empties into the Black Sea, near the Kingdom of Hungary, to what is today Kazakhstan in the east. So it pretty much extended from the Black Sea, through what today is the southern regions of Ukraine, all the way over to the Caspian Sea and further east into what today is Kazakhstan. It was huge, and the Cumans were nomadic horsemen, well trained in the arts of warfare. In fact, in his book "The Prussian Crusade", William Urban states that the Mongols viewed the Cumans as a major threat. To the Mongols the Cumans were the only people able to fight on the same terms as themselves, and were perhaps the only people who possessed the ability to defeat the Mongols on the battlefield.

I guess it should come as no great surprise, then, to learn that having conquered Kievan Rus the Mongol army turned its attentions to the Cumans. What is surprising however is the fact that the Cumans didn't put up a huge amount of resistance when faced with the Mongol threat. Having decided not to confront the Mongol army the Cumans had two choices: surrender to the Mongols, or see refuge elsewhere. Deciding to explore plan B, the "seek refuge elsewhere" option, the Cumans made an interesting move. They sent a request to King

Bela of Hungary for asylum. Yes, the same Cumans who had been invading the Kingdom of Hungary and making so much of a nuisance of themselves that the Kingdom had called on outside help to eject them, were now asking that same Kingdom to open its doors and welcome a bunch of fleeing steppe warriors into their midst.

Why, you might ask, would King Bela even consider such a request? Surely if he welcomed the Cumans into his Kingdom, not only would his subjects be a little put out, surely the Mongols would take out their anger on the Kingdom and immediately invade Hungary. Well, there were two reasons why King Bela needed to seriously consider the request for sanctuary. Firstly, if Hungary failed to provide asylum for the Cumans they would be forced to surrender to the Mongols, and then the Cumans would become part of the Mongol army, and with their local knowledge of easy ways to cross the Carpathian Mountains into Hungary, a Mongol invasion of Hungary was therefore quite likely. Secondly, if the Cuman army joined forces with the Hungarian army, maybe they could put up a reasonable defense should the Mongols invade Hungary. The Cumans agreed to be baptized if the Hungarians gave them sanctuary, and that proposal closed the deal. The Cumans were welcomed across the Carpathians, and the King of Hungary readied his forces for an upcoming Mongol invasion.

Now this, I guess I don't need to tell you, is a big deal. The Mongols are now knocking at the door of Latin Christian Europe. Should they invade Hungary, as King Bela fully expected them to, what's to stop the Mongol forces moving on to the Holy Roman Empire and to major Latin Christian cities like Vienna? Well, Hungary and Poland, that's your answer. Hungary and Poland are really the two barriers the Mongols need to break through to gain access to all of continental Europe.

So, King Bela decided to sound the alarm. He sent urgent messages to Rome, to the Emperor, and to neighboring Poland, warning them of the hell which was about to be unleashed at their doorsteps. But, according to William Urban in his book "The Prussian Crusade" most of King Bela's warnings fell on deaf ears. Understandably it was the Polish Piast Dukes who were most receptive to the call for action, but as William Urban points out, it was one thing for the warring Piast rulers to agree to unite to fight the Mongols, but it was another thing entirely to set aside their quarrels, muster their armies, and head to the eastern borders, waiting for an invasion that may or may not come.

So nothing much happened. It didn't help that the Duke of Krakow, the Duke who could perhaps unite the other rulers behind him, was only a child. In fact, not only was he a child, he was a child being groomed meticulously by his mother for a pious existence as a Saint. Saints don't need military knowledge as part of their skill set, so the young Duke of Krakow wasn't shaping up to be the sort of man who could lead armies to war. So that role fell to Duke Henryk II of Silesia. Duke Henryk was around 50 years old, and was a seasoned warrior who

had been on crusade to Prussia. He was regent to the young Duke of Krakow and had most of the region of Great Poland under his control. He was married to the sister of King Wenceslas of Bohemia, so he was able to request military assistance from Bohemia, and he also managed to obtain promises of military support from the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire, promises which, unfortunately, were never kept.

I say “unfortunately”, because King Bela of Hungary was right to sound the alarm: the Mongols are coming. The good news for Poland was that the target of the Mongol invasion was Hungary. The bad news for Poland was that the Mongols decided to reach Hungary by invading Poland first. The Mongols were suited to fighting on the plains of the steppe country, and crossing the Carpathian Mountains into Hungary wasn’t something they were keen to do, so they decided they would reach Hungary the long way around, through Poland.

The Mongol invasion of Poland took everyone by surprise. Duke Henryk hadn’t moved his armies into position, and everyone was caught out by the speed at which the Mongols were able to launch their invasion. The first wave of attack by the Mongols was repelled, but they regrouped and attacked again, this time with devastating effectiveness. The Polish armies were overrun, and the Mongols streamed through southern Poland, taking towns and cities, burning, looting, and putting citizens to the sword.

Then the Mongols arrived at Krakow, effectively Poland’s capital city. The young Duke of Krakow had by now, sensibly, fled to Hungary. The well-fortified city shut its gates and manned its walls, but the Mongols found a weak point in the city’s defenses, and some Mongol warriors slipped into the city early one morning, just on dawn. A watcher, stationed high on the city walls, noticed the breach, and a trumpeter sounded the alarm. The trumpeter, who was positioned high on the tower of Saint Mary’s Church, was then shot in the throat by a Mongol archer, a feat which was considered such an amazing act of sharp shooting that it is commemorated to this day by a trumpet call which is sounded every hour from the tower of Saint Mary’s Church. In addition, every year on the eighth day after Corpus Christi, a Mongol rider (or more accurately someone dressed to look like a Mongol rider) tours the streets of Krakow on a hobby horse, commemorating the Mongol invasion of the town.

So the capital city of Poland has fallen to the Mongols. Not surprisingly, this sparked some major action. Duke Henryk sent urgent requests for assistance far and wide, but the rapid advance of the Mongols meant that only Count Boleslav of Moravia and the Templar Knights were able to move their armies into position to fight alongside Duke Henryk. In the end, around 10,000 men stood alongside Duke Henryk as he made his stand against the Mongols in April 1241, at a place called Leignitz in Silesia. The Mongol army of skilled horsemen was at least 10,000 strong, with some estimates placing it as being much larger.

Unfortunately the Battle at Leignitz was an absolutely devastating defeat for Poland. Duke Henryk was killed as were most of the 10,000 men fighting with him. Duke Henryk was beheaded and his head was mounted on a spear at the head of the army. Duke Henryk's head led the way as the Mongol horsemen thundered through Silesia, then Moravia, and then down into Hungary. King Bela mounted a brave resistance, but by now everyone had seen the writing on the wall, and fighting men across the region were scattering in preference to facing the all-conquering Mongols. The Cumans fled to neighboring Serbia, and rulers who had promised to send men to fight decided to keep their men away from the action. King Bela's tiny Royal army was easily defeated by the Mongols, and King Bela himself fled to Austria with the cream of the Hungarian fighting force. The Mongols, feeling quite at home on the Hungarian plains, settled in to their new lodgings, and proceeded to send scouting parties as far afield as Vienna to check out possible future conquests.

So, this is all a bit of a shock. The Mongols have stormed through the door of Latin Christian Europe, passing through Poland and planting themselves in Hungary. The Mongols ended up withdrawing from Hungary in due course and headed back to the east, not because they were driven out by the Latin Christians, but because a new Khan was being elected and they wanted to take part.

So, everybody now knows that, if the Mongols wanted to march into Latin Europe, they could do so at any time, and no-one is going to be able to stop them. Gulp. Join me next time as we head back to the Baltic Crusades, more specifically to the Livonian Crusade. Until next week, bye for now.

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