

History of the Crusades. Episode 241. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part XII. The First Prussian Insurrection.

Hello again. Last week we saw Archbishop Albert come off second best in his attempts to reduce the power of the Teutonic Order. We saw the leader of the Order in Livonia, Master Anno, be promoted to the position of Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, and saw the swashbuckling commander of the castle at Konigsberg, Burchard of Hornhusen, leap into the position of Master of the Order in Livonia. Unexpectedly, at the end of last week's episode we saw representatives of the Samogitians approach the Order in Riga with an offer of peace, resulting in a two year truce being called.

The two years of peace ran from 1257 to 1259, and it was lovely. As you all know, with Lithuania toeing the Christian line under the leadership of their King Mindaugas, Samogitia had been the only region to make a pagan stand, and with the peace treaty in place with the Samogitians, this meant that effectively, for the first time since the Baltic Crusades began, there were no wholesale conflicts taking place anywhere in the Baltic region. All the fighting men could take off their armor, send it out for repairs, and stretch out in front of the fire, pondering what to do with their days. Church administrators, no longer needing to allocate money for military escorts or protection, could concentrate on looking after their own administrative centers, and, most importantly of all, merchants were free to travel in safety anywhere they wished.

As a result trade flourished. Merchants were able to travel back and forth from Prussia to Livonia via the land corridor without fear of being attacked, and without needing a military escort. Merchants settled in new Christian outposts such as Memel. Mills and other major infrastructure were built, prosperity increased, and everyone was happy. Well, nearly everyone. Archbishop Albert Suerbeer was still doing his best to obstruct, annoy and besmirch the Teutonic Order, and people were hoping that the Samogitians, who were now moving freely around Livonia and were trading with the merchants who were traveling through their lands, would convert to Christianity. But that didn't happen. Still, these were two really good years for the people of the Baltic region. In fact the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle described the years between 1257 and 1259 as being the best of the century. But we all know that good times don't last, and while many people hoped that the Samogitians might just keep the truce in place after the year 1259, that wasn't to be.

Before we examine the years following the truce however, we need to backtrack a bit because, while we have been concentrating on events in Livonia during the past few episodes, we have been neglecting Prussia, so we need to bring Prussia up to speed. So, let's leave the people of the Baltic region to their basket weaving and, as they hold hands

around their campfires singing Kumbayah, let's travel back in time a little way to Prussia.

Now, last time we checked in on Prussia was in Episode 234, when we saw Duke Swietopelk of Polish Pomerelia, which lay just to the west of Prussia, join forces with the native Prussians, and wage war upon the Teutonic Order in Prussia. Why did he do this? Well, because the trading centers established by the Teutonic Order in Prussia were thriving and were beginning to take business away from the trading centers which had traditionally been plying trade across the Baltic region, in Pomerelia. So, back in Episode 234 we saw Duke Swietopelk invade Prussia in the year 1242, and do the best he could to destroy the new trading centers established by the Order inside Prussia.

Now, in his book "The Prussian Crusade" William Urban points out that Duke Swietopelk was the sort of man who made quick decisions without really taking the time to think things through. William Urban speculates that the Duke of Pomerelia may have believed that the Teutonic Order in Prussia was a bit of a soft target, and with their resources stretched by the events taking place in Livonia, a swift and easy victory by Pomerelia shouldn't be too hard to achieve. Duke Swietopelk had, after all, managed to forge alliances with many Prussian warriors who were keen to see the Teutonic Order ejected from their lands, and with the Order unable to bring reinforcements into Prussia due to their commitments in Livonia, Duke Swietopelk no doubt believed that it wouldn't be too hard to invade Prussia, destroy the trading cities which were taking business away from his own trading centres, drive the Order out of Prussia, then annex the region to Pomerelia, making the Polish territory of Pomerelia a force to be reckoned with, and increasing his power and prestige amongst the other Piast Dukes. So, around the same time as the Mongols were marching into Hungary and Poland, and around the same time as many crusaders in Livonia were heading off on their doomed crusade to Novgorod, Duke Swietopelk and the native Prussians were going on a German-killing, trading-post-destroying rampage through Prussia. And they were actually pretty successful. In his book "The Prussian Crusade" William Urban reports that a number of Prussian strongholds built by the Teutonic Knights in Prussia fell to the Duke's forces, including some strategically vital ones, such as Marienwerder. All in all, around 4,000 men fighting on the side of the Teutonic Knights were killed following Duke Swietopelk's invasion.

Apparently struggling to defend their own castles, the Teutonic Order then made a daring move. In a bold stroke which no-one saw coming, four Teutonic Knights and twenty four sergeants rode into Pomerelia in December of 1242, and captured one of Duke Swietopelk's castles, the stronghold of Sartowitz, which stood on the banks of the Vistula River, just downstream from Kulm. Not only did the Knights kill the garrison of the castle and capture the 150 women and children who lived there, they confiscated the most revered and famous relic in Pomerelia, the Sacred Head of Saint Barbara, which was housed in the castle. The Knights

took the head and the captives upriver to Kulm, then sat back and waited to see what Duke Swietopelk would do next.

What Duke Swietopelk did next was to attempt to take back Sartowitz, a castle which he needed to be in Pomerelian hands if he was to control trade coming up and down the Vistula. Despite the fact that it was wintertime the Duke took a large army of lucky Pomerelian soldiers and besieged the castle for five weeks. By this time it was mid-winter, and Duke Swietopelk noticed that the Vistula had frozen into a solid enough state to enable horses to cross, so he left a small contingent of men at Sartowitz to continue the siege, and crossed the rest of his army over the frozen Vistula and headed to Kulm. Now it's pretty clear that the Duke's plan was to attack Kulm and take it, providing a nice warm place for his army to rest up while the siege of Sartowitz continued nearby. But things didn't go to plan. The Duke's tendency to do things on the spur of the moment, without thinking them through, was about to lead him astray once again.

The Duke's army spread out as they approached Kulm. The defenders from Kulm rode out as the Pomerelians approached, and because the attackers were taking a scatter-gun approach to the attack, rather than focusing their efforts on one particular place, the Teutonic Knights were able to isolate a small portion of the Duke's army, defeat it, and then move on to the next bunch of Pomerelians. By the time the battle was over 900 Pomerelians and Prussians had been killed, and 400 Pomerelian war horses were taken as booty from the area outside Kulm. Duke Swietopelk raced back to Sartowitz, lifted the siege and withdrew deep into Pomerelia, just in time, too, as the defenders from Kulm raced over to Sartowitz, arriving there just after the Duke's departure. They were able to relieve and resupply the castle after its five week long ordeal, and repairs were made to the castle's defenses.

Things didn't go so well for Duke Swietopelk after that. The Teutonic Order raided into Pomerelia, taking more of the Duke's castles, and terrorizing more of the Polish Pomerelians, until the Duke was forced to sue for peace. The peace didn't last very long, though. It all fell apart in June of 1243 when Duke Swietopelk decided to attack Kulm again.

Now, like his first attack on Kulm this attack was ultimately unsuccessful, but unlike the first attack on Kulm, this one left the people of Kulm and Thorn reeling. The Duke used his army of 2,000 mixed Prussians and Pomerelian forces to besiege Kulm for two days, and the besiegers cut down any Teutonic fighters or civilians they came across, with a brutality which shocked many. In the end though the Duke was forced to withdraw without taking Kulm, and the Teutonic Order once again took its revenge by raiding into Pomerelia. By the time 1244 rolled around Master Poppo was the new Master of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, and he used his diplomatic skills to obtain support for the Order from Rome, from the Duke of

Masovia, and from a number of other Piast Dukes. The Knights and their new allies slowly but surely began to recover territory previously taken by Duke Swietopelk inside Prussia, and in the face of this new coalition of Teutonic supporters, Duke Swietopelk once again called for a truce. Once again though, the impulsive Duke broke the truce and proceeded to commence constructing two castles on the Vistula, which he hoped to use to restrict trade going upriver to Kulm and Thorn.

Despite his best efforts, Master Poppo's attempts to take these castles, destroy them and capture or kill Duke Swietopelk in battle were just not working, and in February of 1245 Pope Innocent IV intervened, threatening to excommunicate Duke Swietopelk, unless he ceased his attacks on Prussia and allowed the Teutonic Order to continue their work converting pagans to Christianity. This threat also didn't do the trick, so Pope Innocent started sending crusaders to Prussia, not to fight the pagans but to fight the Christian Pomerelians and their pesky Duke.

In early 1246 a large crusading army arrived in Prussia under the command of Count Heinrich of Liechtenstein and Duke Casimir of Kujavia. Master Poppo joined the Teutonic Knights to this army and led them deep into Pomerelia, hoping to defeat Duke Swietopelk once and for all. Duke Swietopelk, however, was ready for them. He amassed a large force of Prussian fighters and joined them to the cream of the Pomerelian army, and as a result he was in command of a force which he estimated to be twice as large as the army of the crusaders and Teutonic Knights. Duke Swietopelk managed to move his army into position without being noticed by the crusaders, and attempted to ambush the vanguard of the crusader army. A large battle resulted, albeit a totally chaotic one. Duke Swietopelk's Prussian fighters did what they did best, racing around in small groups trying to isolate crusaders and tempt them into the nearby woods, where they could be killed. Around 1,000 of Duke Swietopelk's Pomerelian fighters formed themselves into battle lines, and were met head on by Count Heinrich's men and the Teutonic Knights. The day ended with 1,500 Prussians and Pomerelians dead on the battlefield, with the Teutonic side recording no deaths whatsoever, and only the loss of ten of their horses.

So what went wrong for Duke Swietopelk? Well, apparently, when the 1,000 or so Pomerelians moved into position they erected a shield wall which was also protected by spears. The idea was that the Teutonic Order and their allies would be reluctant to charge their horses into this spiky shield wall, but it turns out that they weren't reluctant at all.

They grouped into lines and charged the wall without any hesitation or delay whatsoever, which seems to have spooked the Pomerelians, some of whom decided to drop their shields and make a run for it. This of course led to the entire shield wall disintegrating, and a massive victory for the Teutonic Order. And you probably won't be surprised to learn that true to form

Duke Swietopelk fled from the battlefield.

You also won't be surprised to learn that Duke Swietopelk called for a truce once again, only to break it again shortly afterwards. Duke Swietopelk couldn't alter the fact, though, that this was a major victory for the Order. The victors from the battle collected 1,000 war horses and 600 smaller riding horses alone from the battlefield, along with a huge haul of armor, weapons and other bits and pieces, enriching the Order and the crusaders, while putting a giant hole in the Pomerelian war chest. With his resources reduced, Duke Swietopelk still refused to admit defeat, so the conflict limped on.

By this time Albert Suerbeer had become the Archbishop of Prussia, handily based well outside Prussia, in Lubeck. Pope Innocent sent a legate into Prussia to try and mediate an end to the conflict, but the Archbishop threatened to excommunicate anyone who spoke to the legate. So that was the end of that.

Now, with this conflict having stretched out for so long, and with still no end in sight, the Teutonic Order may well have stumbled at this point in time. William Urban points out that it was due to the talents of two men, Master Dietrich von Gruningen and (now) Grand Master Poppo, that the Order managed to hold its head above the troubled waters of Prussia. Master Dietrich in particular made the savvy move of transferring the Master's residence from Kulm to Elbing, and used his extensive skills as a diplomat to calm the troubled waters. As William Urban states, and I quote, "It was thanks to Dietrich and a handful of officials like him that the Teutonic Order was not ground to pieces on the millstone of Imperial and Papal forces," end quote.

Duke Swietopelk and his Prussian allies finally threw in the towel in the year 1249, with the signing of the Christburg Treaty, which officially brought the lengthy conflict between the Duke and his Prussian allies and the Teutonic Order to an end. The conflict eventually became known as the First Prussian Insurrection. Duke Swietopelk himself got off pretty lightly, with most of the terms that pertained to him dealing with prohibitions on him restricting trade up the Vistula.

The Prussians weren't so lucky. The good news for the Prussians was that, as long as they remained good, obedient Christians who paid their taxes, then nothing much bad would happen to them. The bad news was the treaty banned all pagan practices, stipulated that the native Prussians were now to become Christians, and forced the Prussians to build churches so they could practice their new religion.

With Pomerelia now out of the picture the Teutonic Order now turned its attentions to

subduing Samland, a move which assisted the Livonian Chapter of the Teutonic Order as they pushed southwards to form their land bridge between Livonia and Prussia.

So now we are all caught up. Everyone is now sitting down and taking a breather during the fabulous two years between 1257 and 1259. And it's a good thing that everyone is taking a nice break, because at the end of the two years of peace all hell is going to break loose. Join me next week as the peace comes to an end and the region is plunged into a series of conflicts which will prove to be absolutely devastating for the Teutonic Order. Until next week, bye for now.

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