

History of the Crusades. Episode 244. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part XIII. The Second Prussian Insurrection.

Hello again. Last week we examined the period of crisis for the Latin Christians of Livonia in the years following the two years of peace. When the peace treaty expired in the year 1259 the Samogitians returned to their aggressive warlike ways, and the repeated failure of the Teutonic Order in Livonia to bring them into line sparked off major rebellions across the region, with Lithuania reverting to paganism and even the people of Oesel, well to the north of the land corridor, rising in rebellion. So things were looking pretty grim in Livonia in the years following the expiration of the peace treaty. What were they like in Prussia? Well, we're about to find out.

Now, last time we checked in on Prussia it was to follow the decade or so long battle between the Teutonic Order and Duke Swietopelk of Pomerelia and his native Prussian allies, a conflict known as the First Prussian Insurrection. Following this Insurrection the Order spent its time subduing the Samlanders in the north of Prussia. Then we had the two beautiful years of peace, when everyone in the region downed their weapons, started trading, and took up basket weaving.

Now, when the truce expired and the Samogitians started causing trouble in Kurland, that may have raised the eyebrows of the Master of the Order in Prussia. When the failure of the Teutonic Order in Livonia to force the Samogitians back into line sparked large-scale uprisings amongst the Semigallians and the Kurs, those eyebrows may have formed into a frown. Whose eyebrows are we talking about here? Well, the current Master of the Teutonic Order in Prussia is a man called Hartmann von Grumbach, who replaced Dietrich von Gruningen as Master during the final year of the two years of peace.

Now, Master Hartmann was not terribly popular with the Knights of the Order. He is described by William Urban in his book "The Prussian Crusade" as, and I quote, "a strict disciplinarian who had used physical compulsion to get his way" end quote. He earned himself the nickname "Hartmann the Shoddy" when he ordered the men training inside the Order's convents to wear rough, un-dyed clothing. In summary, Master Hartmann wasn't the sort of man who was talented at diplomacy. He appeared to be totally lacking in charisma and people skills, and ruled instead with an iron fist, presiding over the Order and the region under his control by means of harsh discipline and fear. The spectacle of the Order in Livonia struggling to contain pagan uprisings caused Master Hartmann to write to Rome to request permission to take hostages from some of the native Prussians, in an attempt to stave off similar uprisings inside Prussia.

When Master Burchard of Livonia approached Master Hartmann with a request that he send a large contingent of fighters into Samogitia to join forces with the Knights from Livonia, Master Hartmann readily agreed. He sent his Marshall into battle with an impressive force of Knights from the Order in Prussia, along with a bunch of Samlanders. Most of these men were killed in the totally disastrous Battle of Durbe in the year 1260.

Now, the Prussian Order seemed to keep its head together following the Battle of Durbe, in contrast to the Order in Livonia, which went into full-blown panic mode. The Livonian Order had, after all, lost its popular swashbuckling Master, Master Burchard, in the battle, whereas the Prussian Order retained their unpopular, uncharismatic, disciplinarian Master Hartmann, who hadn't participated in the battle. So Master Hartmann kept a firm hand on the reins of power, and waited to see what would happen next.

What happened next was a number of raids into Prussia by the no-longer-Christian- anymore King of Lithuania, King Mindaugas, who was busy raiding not only Prussia but Livonia and Masovia as well. The raids by Mindaugas into Prussia sent a signal to the native Prussians that, if they were going to rise up in the same manner as the Lithuanians, Samogitians, Kurs, Semigallians and the people of Oesel, then now would be a good time to do so. So each of the main regions of Prussia met in secret and chose a leader, a leader who would quietly work behind the scenes, organizing men who were opposed to the Teutonic Order, to form themselves into an army when the time was right.

Why did the Prussians want to throw off their Christian overlords? Well basically, Christianity wasn't really working out for most of them, and they wished to return to the good old days of polygamy, human sacrifice and settling honor scores between the clans with blood feuds. Basically the way of life which had served the men of Prussia pretty well for a considerable amount of time had been upended by the arrival of the Teutonic Order and their enforcement of Christianity as the only religion in the region. The practice of Prussian noblemen taking heaps of wives meant that widows of fallen warriors were taken care of, and ensured that a complex web of alliances between the various clans was maintained. Since the arrival of Christianity however, the men were told that they could only have a single wife, which threw the whole system into chaos. Human sacrifice and other pagan rituals had been banned, which caused the Prussians to worry that their deceased relatives and their neglected gods were restless, and would serve some sort of retribution on the living Prussians in punishment for their neglect.

Then there was Christianity itself. Apart from having to sit in churches for hours, praying and singing strange songs, to many Prussians the Christian religion just made no sense at all. The Christian religion seemed to preach love and peace, yet the Teutonic Knights were

violent people who seemed to be not at all reluctant to take up arms against anyone who opposed them. As William Urban pointed out, further confusion arose when the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross was venerated, but blood sacrifice was forbidden to the Prussian people. The Prussians were told to put away their idols, yet statues of Jesus and the virgin Mary were popping up everywhere.

And then there were the taxes. Prior to the arrival of the Teutonic Order, Prussian peasants would grow enough food for themselves, and a little extra to trade. Now they were required to pay taxes in the form of money and grain to the Order. They had to grow extra food to sell to raise money to pay the taxes, and were forced to lug the required amounts of grain to the tax office themselves.

So, for all these reasons, it's not difficult to see why, across Prussia, groups were meeting in secret, plotting and planning, hoping for an opportunity to rise up like their neighbors, and throw off their Christian overlords.

That opportunity arose in September of the year 1260, and sparked a conflict known as the Second Prussian Insurrection. The secret meetings which were held in Samland, Warmia (or Ermland) and the neighboring inland regions of Natangia and Bartia were really successful, with the vast majority of Prussians in those regions joining the rebellion and rising as one. In other regions of Prussia though, the rebellion was more patchy. Whereas in the regions of Samland and Warmia the Prussians were fine about killing any priests and Germans who were living in their midst, in other regions alliances had been formed with the local clergy, and oaths of loyalty had been pledged. The native Prussians took oaths pretty seriously, and many of them remained loyal to the bishops and Teutonic Knights to whom they had sworn allegiance, a fact which split families and divided communities, and which made the rebellion less effective in those regions.

Patchy or not, though, this was still a major pagan uprising, and Master Hartmann knew that he would need assistance to stamp it out. So he sent an urgent call for crusaders to the Holy Roman Empire and to the Piast Dukes in Poland. The first major crusader army arrived in Prussia in January 1261, and Master Hartmann made the decision to split the army into two parts, meaning that half the army was sent to Samland and the other half was sent to Natangia, which lay to the south of Samland.

So did these crusading armies defeat the revolting pagans? No they didn't. In fact the revolting pagans defeated the Christians. In his book "The Prussian Crusade" William Urban states that the decision by Master Hartmann to split the crusader force into two separate armies was a major strategic error on the part of the Master of Prussia, and this strategic

error was compounded by numerous tactical errors displayed by the crusader forces in the field. In a nutshell, both Marshall Hartmann and the crusader armies underestimated the Prussians and overestimated the assistance which they thought would come from native Prussians who remained loyal to the Church.

By now, as the crusaders and the Teutonic Order should have realized, the Prussians were familiar with Latin Christian fighting techniques, and they were devastatingly effective in countering them. They knew that the Latin Christians held the advantage in the field, and so made no attempt to counter the large armies on the battlefield. Instead they hid in nearby forests until the crusaders believed they had won the day. When the crusaders broke into small groups to commence their pillaging and plundering, that's when the Prussians struck, easily defeating the crusaders piece by piece. The prisoners taken by the Prussians were in for a nasty surprise. William Urban reports that there are no records of any of the prisoners being ransomed or released. Instead, many of them found themselves taking a lead role in a pagan tradition which had been long denied to the Prussians: that of human sacrifice. While a bunch of crusaders were being offered up to the pagan gods in a variety of gruesome ways, the victorious Prussians set about consolidating their victory. They expelled any influential members of their communities who had remained loyal to the Christian church, then they sent word into neighboring regions of their victory.

Now, Master Hartmann realized that things were really not going well for the Order, so he sent word to high command, more specifically to Grand Master Anno. Grand Master Anno decided to view the situation for himself and made a personal visit to Kurland in the spring of 1261. The discoveries he made during his visit alarmed him to such a degree that he made an urgent dash to Rome, to inform the Pope that the situation right across the Baltic region was in crisis.

While the leadership team of the Teutonic Order were having all kinds of panic attacks the Prussians were calmly, systematically working to eject the Order from their lands. They laid siege to a number of strategically vital castles inside Prussia, including the castle at Konigsberg. They conducted the sieges in a way which was novel and inventive. Instead of surrounding the castles with their armies, and living in camps in the Latin Christian manner of siege warfare, they built a number of small forts at various points around the castles. They stationed their forces inside the forts, where they were protected from both the weather and the crusaders, and they monitored the comings and goings from the castle, or more accurately, they prevented any comings and goings from the castle.

Master Hartmann just wasn't in a position to be able to send an army to the relief of any of the castles at this point in time, so the garrisons of the castles were left to fend for themselves. Once the storehouses inside the castles were empty the Knights were forced to eat their

horses. The sieges continued and William Urban reports that many Knights lost their teeth to diseases such as scurvy, and were reduced to little more than walking skeletons. Not surprisingly some Knights decided to abandon their posts rather than starve to death. This, however, did not please Master Hartmann. When two Teutonic Knights were found to have abandoned a small fort which was about to be overrun by Prussians, Master Hartmann had them charged with treason, then ordered them to be burned alive as punishment. Instead of providing his troops with an incentive to remain focused on their tasks in the face of pagan aggression, which was probably Master Hartmann's intention, news of the harsh punishment made its way to Rome. Master Hartmann was recalled, was unceremoniously removed from office, and was subjected to a year's punishment himself.

So things are looking pretty dire for the Teutonic Order in Prussia at this time. Samland and Natangia remain in full rebellion, and the Insurrection is spreading to other parts of Prussia. A number of castles, including the strategically important Karshoven, have been abandoned, while a number of others, including Konigsberg, remain under siege while their garrisons slowly starve. To top it all off the Teutonic Order in Prussia is now leaderless, with their Master having been removed from office for burning alive two of the dwindling numbers of Knights under his command.

Join me next week, as Pope Urban IV tries desperately to stem the tide of Prussian insurrection, by sending a new Master to Prussia and flooding the region with crusaders. Until next week, bye for now.

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