

History of the Crusades. Episode 246. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXXVI. The Order fights back.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Second Prussian Insurrection continue. By the end of the year 1263 most of Prussia was under revolt, with the Insurrection having spread from Samland and Natangia across the region, with even southern strongholds such as Kulm and Thorn coming under attack. This week we are going to leave the hot mess which is Prussia at the end of the year 1263, and return to the hot mess which is Livonia.

When we left Livonia two episodes ago it was also the end of the year 1263. To recap, Lithuania had returned to paganism, and King Mindaugas had been assassinated, while Samogitia and Semigallia were pagan, along with parts of Kurland. The island of Oesel had attempted to shake off its Christian overlords, but the rebellion had been successfully quelled by the Teutonic Order. Now, you might remember that Master Werner had asked to be relieved of his duties after having been set upon by an insane Teutonic knight. Grand Master Anno had granted his request, and Master Konrad took up the position of Master of Livonia towards the end of the year 1263.

Now, Master Konrad was a proactive sort of a person who hit the ground running in Livonia. He seized upon the only surviving son of the assassinated King Mindaugas and managed to get him to agree to go to war against Samogitia, in return for Teutonic support to regain his father's crown in Lithuania. Master Konrad assembled a large group of Knights to formally ratify his agreement with King Mindaugas' son, and decided to make good use of the impressive body of fighting men while he had them, sending them into Semigallia to attack the pagan Semigallians. The raid was initially pretty successful, but disaster struck as the force was heading back to Riga with a load of Semigallian booty. The savvy Semigallians had felled a number of large trees, and used them to block the route they knew the Latin Christians would use to travel to Riga. The blockage forced the Knights to detour, and the detour led them straight into an ambush set by the Semigallians. The resulting fight led to the deaths of twenty Knights and 600 Latin Christian fighting men, which was an absolute disaster for the already overstretched Teutonic Order.

Following this setback Master Konrad seems to have proceeded with greater caution. Deciding not to attack Lithuania after all, he instead signed a treaty with the Lithuanian warlords in the year 1264, and did his best to appease Archbishop Albert Suerbeer, who was jumping up and down, demanding that the Order pay taxes to enable the building of various infrastructure such as churches and bridges. Not surprisingly, using the Order's depleted funds to enhance Archbishop Albert's power-base wasn't high on the list of Master Konrad's priorities at this point in time, so his efforts to appease the Archbishop actually ended up

antagonizing him further.

Archbishop Albert's fury reached new heights when Master Konrad decided to build a fabulous new castle at a place called Mitau, on an island in the middle of the Lielupe (or Aa) River in Semigallia. Now, this castle was in a really good spot. It was inland, but its location on one of the main rivers in Semigallia meant that the castle had ready access to much of the region. In fact, just so you know, the castle at Mitau will eventually develop into the city of Mitau, which will become the seat of power for the Duchies of Kurland and Semigallia for a couple of hundred years, and then will be the administrative center of the Kurland Governorate until the year 1918. So it's going to become a very important city. It is currently called Jelgava and is located in central Latvia.

Back in the year 1265, when Master Konrad decided to build the castle at Mitau, he had no idea how important the castle and its location would come to be, although right from the outset it was clear that the castle was in an ideal location, with knights from the castle able to use it as a base to attack pagan settlements to its south. There was one major drawback with the castle though, that drawback being: it was located on territory belonging to Archbishop Albert, and Archbishop Albert had not provided permission for the Order to build a castle on archiepiscopal land. Master Konrad decided he could get around this apparently minor sticking point by going over Archbishop Albert's head and seeking authority directly from Rome for permission to build the castle. Papal permission was granted belatedly in 1266, and Master Konrad then assumed that the issue was adequately dealt with. Trouble was, it wasn't adequately dealt with, as the whole incident had made Archbishop Albert very, very angry.

Archbishop Albert would wait to get his revenge though, and that suited Master Konrad as, by the time he had spent three years as Master, he was suffering a major case of burn-out, so he asked to be relieved of his duties. Master Anno granted his request, and a new Master for Livonia, Master Otto, was appointed in 1267.

Now, it was clear to Master Otto when he traveled to Livonia to take up his position, that his first priority should be to immediately secure Livonia's borders. Not only were the Lithuanians making war-like noises, and increasing the number of raids they were conducting across the Daugava, a potentially even more serious problem was brewing. Skirmishes had broken out on the border between the Russian Principalities and Estonia, and rumor had it that Russia was preparing to launch a major invasion into Latin Christian territory. Master Konrad had done his best to secure the borderlands, and had built a castle at Weissenstein in Estonia, predominately to protect the region of Jerwen, but the Principalities of Pskov and Novgorod were still threatening to bring war to the people of Estonia. So, before Master Konrad had thrown in the towel, he had called on crusaders from the Holy Roman Empire to come to Estonia and the northern regions of Livonia to help out in case the Russians invaded.

One of the crusaders to answer this call was Count Gunzelin of Schwerin, a descendant of Henry the Black. Now, Count Gunzelin was an interesting man. He was extremely ambitious, but didn't really have the resources or connections to further his ambitions, and with a number of bridges burning behind him in the Holy Roman Empire, he spied an opportunity when the call came out for crusaders to travel to Livonia. Consequently he made his crusading vows, and traveled to Livonia in the summer or autumn of 1267, all prepared to embark on a winter campaign to Novgorod. When he arrived in Riga, however, he met with Albert Suerbeer. Ba Ba Ba Baa. Sorry, that was actually suspenseful music, our sound effects person is on holidays at the moment, so I'm making do.

Anyway, Count Gunzelin met with Archbishop Albert, and as William Urban notes in his book "The Baltic Crusade", while it is unclear who made the proposal and exactly how it was made, what is clear is that on 21 December 1267 the Count and the Archbishop signed an agreement. What did this agreement say? Well, it was a proposal for the two men to work together to attack the Teutonic Order, conquer the Order, and divide up its territories between them. Remember how Count Gunzelin's ancestor Henry the Black kidnapped King Valdemar the Second of Denmark? Well, Count Gunzelin must have inherited Henry the Black's risk-taking genes. Crafty old Archbishop Albert, knowing that the Count was full of ambition but short of resources, formally appointed the Count to take control of all the lands belonging to the Archbishopric, with the aim of protecting them from all enemies. The Count would then make a move against the Teutonic Order, with the agreement providing that he would be rewarded generously with grants of land should he succeed. Should he fail however, the agreement effectively allowed Archbishop Albert to wipe his hands of all involvement and responsibility in the matter, with the agreement expressly stipulating that the Archbishop was not even required to pay the Count's ransom should he be captured. So the risk was all on the side of the Count, but that didn't seem to bother Count Gunzelin.

With his eye on the glittering prize of scoring himself vast swathes of land in Semigallia, the Count prepared the archiepiscopal territories for war; not for a war against the Russians, but against the Teutonic Order in Livonia. In his book "The Baltic Crusade", William Urban states it is likely that Count Gunzelin inspected the castles under the Archbishop's control, visited his vassals, and did as much research as he could as to the strength and numbers of the Teutonic Order in the region. Then, deciding that they needed more men if they were going to defeat the Order, both the Count and the Archbishop went on a recruitment drive, the Count traveling to Gottland (of all places) and the Archbishop traveling to Lithuania, where both men hoped they could gain some fighting men happy to bear arms against the Knights of the Teutonic Order.

Master Otto, apparently unaware of this looming threat which had been brewing on the home front, had other concerns at this point in time because the Russians had invaded. The son of Alexander Nevsky, a man called Prince Dimitry, had managed to gather a large army and had invaded Estonia. An equally large army composed of local Latin Christians and crusaders, had gathered at Dorpat to oppose the Russian invasion, and the two forces met in battle in February of 1268. Now, contemporary accounts of this battle are confusing and difficult to follow. It seems that the two armies were really evenly matched, and the massive and desperate battle was fought to exhaustion. The armies were both so large that separate fights were taking place across the battlefield, with separate victories and losses by both sides playing out as the battle progressed. Depending on where you were situated there were nearly as many viewpoints of the progress of the battle as there were men fighting in it. One Russian chronicler probably spoke for most of the men who fought that day though, when he noted that the conflict which took place was, and I quote “a terrible battle, such as neither fathers nor grandfathers had seen,” end quote. To make it even more confusing, when the battle was over there was no clear winner. The Latin Christians withdrew to defend a river crossing, and the Russians eventually ended up retreating back to Russia. So I guess if the Latin Christian objective had been to force the Russians back over the border, then that objective had been achieved.

Master Otto now seized control of the situation. He placed an embargo on trading goods from Novgorod in an effort to force the Russians to accept peace with their neighbors. He also uncovered the plot by Archbishop Albert to use Count Gunzelin to overthrow the Order in Livonia. Acting quickly he wrote to the merchants of Gottland and warned them that, should they join the Count’s recruitment drive, great misery and pain would rain down on them for the rest of their days. The threat was effective, and Count Gunzelin realized that the game was over. Wisely deciding not to return to Livonia, he took himself back to Schwerin, to see if he could mend some of the bridges he had previously burned there.

So Count Gunzelin is out of the picture, but Master Otto is still left with a burning question: what should be done with Archbishop Albert Suerbeer? Master Otto was clearly a man of action, and he decided not to hold back when dealing with Riga’s Archbishop. Albert Suerbeer had, after all, spent the past three decades doing all he possibly could to harm the interests of the Order. Now, in attempting to overthrow the Order by violent means, and with a written document providing sufficient proof of his intentions, Master Otto must have felt that he was finally able to make a decisive move against the Archbishop. What was the decisive move which Master Otto decided to make? Well, he sent a contingent of Teutonic Knights to the cathedral in Riga with orders that they were to kidnap the Archbishop while he was in the middle of conducting a religious service. After this public act of humiliation was carried out,

the kidnapped Suerbeer was marched to the Order's stronghold at Segewold, where he was kept imprisoned in close confinement on rations of bread and water. While the Archbishop was safely out of the picture, Master Otto then visited all the Archbishop's vassals, and forced them to swear oaths of allegiance, not to the Archbishop but to the Teutonic Order.

So, did this ploy work? It absolutely did. In December of 1268, Albert Suerbeer surrendered, completely and utterly, to the demands of the Teutonic Order. He agreed to cease harassing the Order, and also agreed not to complain to Rome about his imprisonment. Master Otto then sent Teutonic garrisons to all of the Archbishop's castles, and escorted him back to Riga where, perhaps to everyone's surprise, Albert stayed in his corner, meekly and weakly waving the flag for the Teutonic Order. As William Urban states in his book "The Baltic Crusade" and I quote "A broken man, Albert Suerbeer was an obedient puppet of the crusading Order until his death several years later" end quote.

And the good times continued for Master Otto. Having dealt more than adequately with Albert Suerbeer, Master Otto's encore was to end the war with Russia. In 1268 a combined army of around 18,000 crusaders and Latin Christian fighters, along with 9,000 sailors, crossed the border into Russian territory and besieged the city of Pskov. An army from Novgorod managed to relieve the city, but the end result of the invasion was a treaty which was signed on board a ship on Lake Peipus. The treaty brought peace to the warring neighbors and everyone packed up and went home.

So Master Otto is on a bit of a roll, but we shouldn't get too excited as Samogitia, Semigallia and Lithuania are all still pagan, and are all still threatening Livonia's existence. Still, Livonia seems to be in safe hands at the moment. So join me next week as we turn our attentions back to Prussia. Until next week, bye for now.

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