

## History Of The Crusades. Episode 273. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XLIX. The Great Estonian Insurrection Part 2.

Hello again. Last week we examined the beginning of the Great Estonian Insurrection, a major uprising of the peasants of Estonia which commenced in April of 1343. Now by the end of last week's episode Master Burchard of the Livonian Chapter of the Teutonic Order had met with four leaders from the rebellion to talk terms, which ended up resulting in the deaths of those four leaders. Now, the obvious next move for the Teutonic Knights to take, according to Master Burchard, would be to send groups of knights out into the Estonian countryside to kill the now leaderless revolting Estonian peasants.

But this was easier said than done. Yes, the men under Master Burchard's command were better trained and better equipped than their peasant counterparts, but the peasants held two important advantages. The first advantage they held was the benefit of local knowledge and of local support, meaning that they knew the layout of the countryside better than the Teutonic Knights, knew about all the good ambush points and hiding places, and knew of places of safety to which they could flee if necessary. The second factor they had on their side was one of numerical advantage. There were lots of peasants, heaps of them in fact, and groups of peasants numbering 100 men or more were able to gather and surround small groups of Teutonic Knights.

Admittedly, due to the superior armor, weaponry and training of the knights, these encounters tended to end badly for the peasants, but in the view of the peasants they just needed to keep pressing forward with the rebellion until outside help arrived. In other words, they didn't need to defeat the Teutonic Knights, they just needed to remain undefeated themselves, until their calls for assistance from Finland, Novgorod and Lithuania were answered.

The difficulties in doing this, however, were placed into stark focus when a force of 200 peasants attacked the Teutonic force being led by Master Burchard. The Teutonic Knights easily fought off this attack, and killed most of the attackers. Almost immediately another wave of around 100 peasants charged at the knights. They too were driven back and killed. The Teutonic Knights then decided to make camp, and had just completed unsaddling their horses when word came in that a nearby unit of Teutonic Knights had been swarmed upon by a very large group of revolting peasants, and were, in fact, on the verge of being defeated. The Master ordered his men to hastily re-saddle their horses, then they mounted up and rode at speed to the rescue of their comrades. When the peasants saw the Master's force charging towards them on their warhorses, they retreated across a stream and took up positions on the far bank of the stream, likely figuring that the Knights would be at their most vulnerable when crossing the stream and would be easier to defeat.

The Master's forces realized this as well. They discussed how best to tackle the problem, and in the end it was decided that the knights would dismount and leave the horses in a group, guarded by some men from the Order who would prevent the peasants from attacking the rear of the Teutonic forces and stealing their horses, The rest of the Teutonic Knights would wade through the stream on foot and attack the peasants once they reached the far bank. William Urban in his book "The Livonian Crusade" states that the resulting battle was hard fought as the peasants were fighting from a strong position and had a large numerical advantage. But the end result was another decisive victory for the Teutonic Order. William Urban reports that the rebel deaths numbered around 1600

peasants, whereas the butcher's bill for the Teutonic Order came to a total of two Teutonic Knights killed, along with one Estonian nobleman, four Estonian gentry, and fourteen common fighting men.

Buoyed by this victory, Master Burchard decided to march on Reval. By the time Master Burchard arrived at Reval, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1343, the city was being besieged by several thousand Estonian peasants. Undeterred by the vast enemy numbers, Master Burchard ordered an attack, an attack which was just as successful as the previous battle by the stream. Not long after the battle commenced it became clear to the Estonian peasants that the day was not going to go their way, and they offered to surrender. Master Burchard, however, was having none of it. Keen to make an example of the revolting peasants who had the audacity to besiege Estonia's main city, he refused to talk terms, and instead ordered his men to cut down and kill any Estonian peasant found bearing arms. The resulting death toll was horrendous. As the Teutonic Knights left the battlefield they invited the citizens of Reval to come out from their besieged town, and view the bodies of 3,000 peasants who had given their lives to their failed rebellion.

I say "failed rebellion" because that's exactly what Master Burchard believed it was. The death of 3,000 insurrectionists was enough, in Master Burchard's mind, to spell the end of the uprising - but it wasn't quite over just yet. While the Estonians around Reval and the surrounding regions had been defeated, and had acknowledged as much, there were still pockets of rebelling peasants popping up in the countryside in other regions of Estonia, and, more alarmingly, rumor had it that the Swedish Governor of Finland was, at this very moment, sailing to Reval with a Swedish army in response to the peasants' request for assistance.

The Bishop of Reval, who ruled the city on behalf of the Danish Crown, was concerned that he didn't have enough fighting men to repel a Swedish invasion, so he formally requested assistance from Master Burchard, in exchange for the Teutonic Order being gifted a number of castles in the region, with the proviso that the castles be returned to the Bishop of Reval, if requested. This was a bit of an awkward situation diplomatically, as technically the Order may have been stepping on the toes of the Danish Crown by installing themselves in Danish castles. So the Bishop of Reval sent a letter to King Valdemar IV of Denmark explaining the situation.

The letter read as follows, and I quote, "Let everyone know now, and later, that we having deliberated and counseled over this, and after invasion of the apostate Estonians, their plundering and killing in our domains, ravaging and devastating our estates, and performing other evil actions, not seeing any other way to save our land and pacify it, we have called the Master of Livonia into our lands, and chosen him our leader and protector, giving him the castles at Reval and Wesenberg, with their lands and associated property, to preserve them faithfully for the Danish Crown, with the promise that when we ask for these castles they will be returned quietly within a month. Before their return the Master and the Order will be paid for the expenses, losses and investments they have made in the castles," end quote.

The Swedish forces arrived in Reval not long after this letter was sent. Disappointed to receive the news that he had arrived too late and that the rebellion was already over, the Swedish Governor of Finland just kind of hung around Reval for a while, waiting to see whether the uprising would kick back into action.

Now the castellan whom the Teutonic Order had installed in the castle at Reval, a man called Goswin von Herike, found himself negotiating a bit of a diplomatic minefield following the arrival of the foreign army. He had to be careful not to antagonize the Swedish commanders, as he had no wish whatsoever to find himself in a military confrontation with Sweden. But he was also no pushover, and had to work hard behind the scenes to ensure that the Swedish commander failed to discover that there were pockets of rebellious peasants in regions outside of Reval, who would no doubt rise up en masse should they discover that a Swedish army had just arrived in Estonia to support their cause. So, the castellan kept the Swedish forces out of Reval itself, making them set up camp outside its walls, and did his best to convince the Swedish Governor that the rebellion was completely over, and that the assistance of the Swedes was no longer required. To ensure that the army was fully occupied, and not doing pesky things such as trying to scout for intelligence on the rebellion in other parts of Estonia, the castellan arranged for the Swedish commanders to tour local fishing ports, and he extended an invitation to the Swedish Governor to rebuild some of the fishing villages which had been destroyed during the uprising.

The ploy worked. The Swedish Governor eventually departed from Estonia, completely unaware that the rebellion was still, in fact, underway in regions outside of Reval. The Governor also ended up sending Swedish builders and fishermen to Estonia, to rebuild and repopulate some of the coastal towns, a move which, William Urban points out, strengthened diplomatic ties between the Swedes and the Estonians, and the Livonian Chapter of the Teutonic Order.

In fact, the Swedes set sail back to Finland just in time, because shortly after they left Estonia's shores the insurrection broke out once again, this time on the island of Oesel. Now, unlike the rebellion which had arisen around Reval, the one on Oesel looked like it may have a shot at succeeding. We all know the history of the people of Oesel, people of a rather feisty and independent nature, descended from pirates who had staunchly resisted the coming of Latin Christianity to their lands. Now, apparently, the thought that Oesel would be the perfect place for an uprising hadn't really occurred to anyone outside Oesel. When fighting first broke out around Reval, the most talented knights and fighting men who were garrisoned on Oesel were transferred to Reval, to assist in putting down the rebellion. This, of course, presented rebels on Oesel with an opportunity too good to ignore. With the German fortifications on the island now sparsely garrisoned, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 1434 the peasants of Oesel went on the attack.

Now, the Bishop of Oesel wasn't on the island of Oesel at the time of the uprising. Oddly, the seat of the Bishopric of Oesel was not actually on the island of Oesel at all, but was located in the town of Hapsal, just across the channel from Oesel, on the Estonian mainland. Incidentally, Hapsal today is called Haapsalu. The Bishop barricaded himself inside the Episcopal castle in Hapsal, and waited to see what would happen. What happened was that the rebels managed to completely overrun the island of Oesel. Realizing that the peasants of Oesel clearly had the upper hand, Latin Christian fighting men across the island offered to surrender. The rebels made them come together in one place to formally make their peace offer, then they had them all killed. In fact the rebels on Oesel were completely merciless. Not only did they kill any Latin Christians on the island who were capable of making a military stand against them, they threw any person who was reported to be a devout Christian, who was on Oesel, into the sea.

Now, the rebellion on Oesel presented a number of problems to Master Burchard. While the island could be accessed in winter by traversing the sea ice, it was currently mid-summer, and the only way to send men from the Teutonic Order to Oesel to put down the rebellion was by ship, and Master Burchard didn't possess any ships which were large enough and sturdy enough to transport a contingent of knights along with their warhorses. So he sent word to Prussia that he was going to need more men. Then he began preparations for a winter campaign to Oesel. While he was waiting for winter to come Master Burchard busied himself stamping out outbreaks of rebellion across Estonia. And he did a pretty good job of it. By the time the weather began to cool and the end of the year 1343 began to approach, Master Burchard had managed to defeat the two last strongholds of peasants who had made a stand to the south, and had driven back men from Pskov who had entered the Bishopric of Dorpat to support the rebellions. So, by the beginning of the year 1344 the only peasants making a rebel stand in Estonia were the rebels on Oesel.

Join me next week as Master Burchard launches a major offensive against the peasants of Oesel in February of 1344. Until next week, bye for now.

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