

History of the Crusades. Episode 211. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XVII. The Danish Checkmate.

Hello again. Last week we saw Bishop Albert achieved a high level of crusader recruits from his annual recruitment drive to Saxony in 1217. One of the star recruits was Albert of Orlamunde, Count of Holstein, who sailed from Lubeck to Gottland and then onto Riga with his small army in the summer of 1217, while Bishop Albert was still in Germany drumming up crusade volunteers.

Why did Bishop Albert remain in Germany? Well, because he knew that Livonia was in desperate need of every crusade volunteer he could send their way. Why was Livonia so in need of volunteers? Well, because the Estonians were currently assembling in the borderlands between Estonian territory and the land belonging to the Letts. Around 6,000 Estonian fighters had already answered the call to arms, and if this wasn't bad enough, the Russian Princes of Pskov and Novgorod had decided to support the Estonian push into Christian Livonia, and had promised to send a large Russian army to join the Estonians in September of 1217.

I guess I don't have to tell you that this was really bad news for the Latin Christians. Realistically, they knew they would have trouble beating the combined Estonian and Russian forces, so there was really only one sensible cause of action they could follow: they needed to strike before the Estonian and Russian armies joined forces. As soon as Count Albert and his men arrived in Riga, preparations were made to march to meet the mustered Estonian forces, to do as much damage to those forces as possible before the Russians arrived on the scene. In the end, around 3,000 men joined the march to Estonia under the command of the Master of the Sword Brothers. The three thousand strong force was made up of Sword Brothers, crusaders, including Count Albert and his army, men from the Bishop's household, and local Livonian and Lett fighters. The men lined up and marched to Fellin in Estonia, where some captured Estonians informed them that the Estonian forces were mustered nearby, and we're eager for battle.

The Master of the Sword Brothers decided to divide his men into three formations. The Germans, including the crusaders and Sword Brothers, would take the center while the Livonians, under the command of "I've-been-to-Rome" Caupo, would fight on the right and the Letts would line up on the left. The Master of the Sword Brothers ordered the army to move forward, and they met the Estonians coming out of the woods towards them, ready to fight. The German Knights charged and were able to fight their way into the center of the Estonian forces, breaking up their battle lines and causing some of the Estonian fighters to scatter. The Letts, who were fighting on the left side, also met with success, pursuing Estonians fleeing from the crumbling center of their attack, and managing to kill many of them, including some Estonian Elders. The Livonians, however, were not so lucky. They bore the full brunt of an Estonian lance attack. They ended up joining the German fighters in the centre, but one of the many victims of the Estonian lancers was their leader, "I've-been-to-Rome" Caupo. Here is what our chronicler, Henry of Livonia, has to say about Caupo's death, and I quote: "Caupo indeed, who had been run clear through by a lance, faithfully commemorating the Lord's passion, receiving the sacrament of the Lord's body, gave up the spirit in a sincere confession of the Christian religion, after he had first divided all his goods amongst the Churches established in Livonia. Count Albert, the Abbott and all who were with them, mourned over him. His body was burned and the bones were taken away to Livonia and buried at Cubbesele." End quote.

Despite the sad loss of one of the most loyal of the Livonian converts, the Latin Christians had won the day. They pursued the fleeing Estonians relentlessly and killed all they could find. The booty they collected from the battlefield was staggering. Henry of Livonia reports that nearly two thousand Estonian horses were taken by the Latin Christians, along with piles of weapons. The spoils were divided amongst the victors. Henry of Livonia reports that it was difficult to provide a final toll of the number of Estonians dead or injured, because it was tricky to count the pagans who had been chased down and killed in the forests and swamps. He estimated, however, that the number of Estonian dead was close to 1,000.

The remaining Estonians decided that the Latin Christian victory was so overwhelming that they may as well convert to this new, powerful religion. The separate Estonian tribes surrendered hostages to the Latin Christians, agreed to baptism, and promised to pay tithes to Bishop Albert. The Russian armies of the Principalities of Pskov and Novgorod, most likely hearing of the crushing defeat, didn't end up traveling to the battlefield.

Now, although the defeat and capitulation of the Estonians sounds like a big deal, remember that Estonia is comprised of numerous tribes, all acting separately. The tribes which have just pledged fealty to Bishop Albert, are only the tribes living in the borderlands between Estonian and Livonian territory. Across the rest of Estonia, the tribes are still defiantly pagan, and still violently anti German.

Now, Count Albert of Orlamunde took part in the battle against the Estonians, but he didn't seem to be as satisfied with the outcome as his crusader brothers in arms. No, Count Albert had the interests of Denmark, not Germany, in mind, and while the Germans were more than happy to conquer Estonia piece by piece, by moving gradually from the borderlands of Livonia into Estonia, Count Albert was more interested in Oesel. The pirates of Oesel had been menacing Denmark and Sweden for decades, and really he would prefer that the Crusaders left the mainland Estonians alone for the present time, and assisted him, Count Albert, to conquer Oesel for Denmark.

Not surprisingly, however, the German Crusaders weren't too keen on this plan. The Germans wanted to conquer mainland Estonia for Bishop Theodoric, not the island of Oesel for the King of Denmark. The issue was debated at length with Count Albert arguing that the Crusaders should accompany himself and his army to Oesel, and the Germans resisting his call. In the end, the weather made the decision for them. Count Albert's plan had been to march overland through Estonia to Oesel, and then use the winter ice to cross over to the island. In the winter, the sea ice around the island froze solid, and Oesel could be accessed without the need for boats. However, by the time the arguing was over the ice had started to melt, making the expedition impossible. So the Germans sighed with relief, and Count Albert and his men joined the Crusaders in conquering parts of mainland Estonia for Bishop Albert.

But the damage had been done. Count Albert had experienced first hand how easy it would be for a well equipped Danish army to conquer not only Oesel, but all of Estonia and probably Livonia as well. All the Danish Crown really needed to do would be to restrict the number of German crusaders traveling to Livonia and Estonia, and fill the shortfall with Danish men. Spring arrived and with their crusading vows fulfilled, Count Albert and his men sailed back to Lubeck. Count Albert was intent on having a quiet chat to King Valdemar II of Denmark about the Estonian situation, and if you think this spells bad news for Bishop Albert and his plans for Livonia and Estonia, you would be exactly right.

The Crusaders which Bishop Albert has been recruiting for the past couple of decades, have volunteered for service after hearing Bishop Albert preached the Crusade on his annual recruitment drives. In order to swing Christian Livonia and the conquering of Estonia from being a German concern to a Danish one, the Danish king needs to reduce the number of German crusaders, and there's a pretty easy way for him to do this. King Valdemar is currently occupying most of the territory which has been Bishop Albert's recruitment ground. Crucially, he also controls Lubeck and the other port cities used to export men and goods around the Baltic Sea. So all King Valdemar needs to do is have a quiet word with the new Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, Archbishop Gerhard, and the Archbishop could use his authority over the region to prevent Bishop Albert from preaching his Crusade, and therefore stop him from recruiting men. Now, at this point in time, Archbishop Gerhard was still in all sorts of financial difficulties, so perhaps the Danish King made it worth his while financially to place crusading shackles on Bishop Albert, but whatever the inducement was, it worked.

Bishop Albert's recruitment drive in the year 1218 was a massive failure. In his book "The Baltic Crusade" William Urban reports that initially Archbishop Gerhard merely refused Bishop Albert's usual request for financial assistance and men. Bishop Albert didn't take this very well, and started to explore the possibility of lobbying Rome to get the Bishopric of Riga transferred out of Archbishop Gerhard's jurisdiction, into the care of the Archbishop of Magdeburg. This provoked a devastating response from Archbishop Gerhard, who promptly forbade Bishop Albert from preaching his Crusade in Saxony, and moved to ensure that any Crusade volunteers bound for Livonia were not allowed to use the port of Lubeck. This, of course, sent Bishop Albert into a tailspin. Livonia was still under threat of attack by the surrounding pagans and the Russians, and there was no way that Christian Livonia could be defended, or Estonia could be conquered, without the assistance of crusaders.

Bishop Albert was faced with a choice. He could either sit back and watch while the territory he had painstakingly conquered for the Church in Livonia was re-conquered by the pagans and Russians, or he could ask the Danish King for assistance. Having already masterfully forced Bishop Albert onto the ropes with a bit of behind-the-scenes maneuvering, King Valdemar was only too happy to answer Bishop Albert's plea for assistance. I can just picture him making sympathetic noises as Bishop Albert explained how the actions of Archbishop Gerhard had prevented him from recruiting crusaders. Bishop Albert then humbly requested Danish assistance to restart the Crusade, at which point King Valdemar may well have slapped Bishop Albert on the back, and stated that he would be only too happy to help out. Ah, but there was a condition. From now on, Estonia and Livonia would be subjects of Denmark. And that, dear listeners, is how you play the game of thrones.

Having scored himself Estonia and Livonia without so much as barely lifting a finger, King Valdemar ordered Lubeck to once again start exporting Crusaders, and a small fleet of ships carrying the latest round of recruits departed from Lubeck in 1218. Now, unusually, Bishop Albert decided against sailing with this fleet, but there was one important passenger making the Lubeck-Gotland-Riga run. That person was Henry Borewin, the Prince of Mecklenburg. Now, Prince Henry was a Danish vassal, and he didn't consider himself to be a German. No, he was Slavic, and this would be a precursor of things to come. The direct involvement of the Danish crown in Estonia and Livonia will bring a

marked increase in the number of highly ranked noblemen from Central Europe making their way to Livonia, with Prince Henry leading the way.

In the end, it seems that Bishop Albert's capitulation to Danish interests was the right move to make at this time because the Latin Christians of Livonia were going to need all the crusaders they could muster in the campaign season of 1218, because once again the Russians were coming. Henry of Livonia reports that a 16,000 strong force, made up of Russians from Pskov and Novgorod, raided the borderlands between Estonia and Livonia, and in his book "The Baltic Crusade" William Urban states that the figure of 16,000 men may not have been an exaggeration. The combined Livonian, Lett, German, and Danish forces numbered nowhere near that many; William Urban, in fact, reports that they had less than 100 horsemen. However, they did a valiant job of holding back the Russians. In the end, the Russians advanced as far as the fort at Wenden, which was just to the north of Treiden, and then, having fought on the Latin Christian frontier for two weeks, they withdrew back to Russia. Why did they retreat to Russia? Well, it wasn't because of the pushback by the German forces. No, the Principality of Pskov was attacked by the Lithuanians, who decided to make the most of the absence of fighting men in the Principality to score themselves some territory, so the Russians headed back to defend their homeland.

Once the Russians had withdrawn, Prince Henry of Mecklenburg and the Crusaders decided to check out the situation in Estonia, and in February 1219 they braved the harsh winter weather to mount an attack on the settlement of Reval, which today is called Tallinn and is the capital of Estonia. The attack was successful, with the Crusaders taking many prisoners and much booty. However, the intense cold took its toll, with a number of crusaders dying of exposure or coming down with frostbite.

Prince Henry returned to Central Europe with amazing stories of opportunities for conquest in Estonia, ensuring that the recruitment numbers for 1219 were impressive indeed. However, the main players in the military campaigns will now be Danish, not German. King Valdemar had effectively checkmated Bishop Albert, and the Livonian Crusade, as a result, has transformed from a German affair to a Danish one.

Join me next week as the Danish conquest of Estonia commences. Until next week, bye for now.

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