

History of the Crusades. Episode 243. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part XXXV. Crisis.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Teutonic Order in Livonia fail repeatedly in their efforts to subdue the Samogitians. We saw the Semigallians decide to revert to paganism, and we saw the Teutonic Order in Livonia combine forces with their brothers in Prussia to attempt to put an end to paganism in the region once and for all, a move which backfired spectacularly at the Battle of Durbe.

Now the Battle of Durbe took place in July 1260 and it's difficult to overstate the negative consequences for the Order which arose from the battle. Around 150 Teutonic Knights had been killed in the battle, including the swashbuckling Master of the Order in Livonia, Master Burchard. Thousands of Christian fighters from across the region who had pledged to fight alongside the Teutonic Order in its war against the Samogitians also lay dead. The effects of the battle were felt almost immediately. The Teutonic Order in Livonia found itself leaderless, depleted of members, and unable to call upon the Prussian Chapter of the Order for assistance, since they were reeling from their own losses. A temporary commander was put in place in Livonia, a man called George, and George quickly found himself facing a number of serious problems. Just as the confidence and morale of the Order had plummeted to depths never before seen, the confidence and morale of the pagan factions and anti-Christian proponents in the land corridor between Livonia and Prussia soared.

The first general uprising which took place was in Kurland. Fighters from Kurland who had fought alongside their Latin Christian allies suddenly turned on them, with breathtaking brutality. The commander of the castle at Goldingen, along with a small contingent of Teutonic Knights, were set upon by the Kurs, and died horrible deaths, some of them being roasted alive. Equally brutal reprisals by the Teutonic Order against the rebelling Kurs took place, with the Order sending an army into Kurland and marching to a stronghold which was in Kurland but under the control of the Samogitians. The stronghold was surrounded by ditches, so the Teutonic army filled the ditches with wood and set the whole thing ablaze. The rebel forces inside the castle, which also eventually caught fire, a bunch of Lithuanians, Samogitians and Kurs, all died in the resulting fire, with the Order reporting that any rebels fleeing the fire who were over eleven years of age were killed, and their bodies thrown back into the flames. The prospect of being burnt alive by a bunch of Christian knights was so unappealing to the people of the region that many tribes within Kurland experienced second thoughts about their decision to revert to paganism. They pledged loyalty once again to the Order and sent hostages to Riga to secure their pledges.

OK, so parts of Kurland are sort of, tentatively, back in Christian hands, although the castles

at Karshowen and Doblen have been abandoned as being too difficult to hold. Things aren't going so well however on the home front. Both Samogitia and Semigallia decided to mount attacks on Livonia, sending raiding parties across the Daugava River deep into Livonian territory, burning villages and scoring booty before withdrawing back to their own lands. These raiding parties were small, fast, lethal and very difficult to counter. By the time the Teutonic Order had been notified of an attack on a Livonian village, and by the time they moved their men into position, the pagans had long since departed. So George decided that the best strategy would be to try and catch the pagan raiders at the border, when, laden down with booty, they were returning back home.

So, George ordered the main routes usually used by the pagans, and the main crossing points over the Daugava, to be guarded. It was a good plan, but it all fell apart when the Order encountered a particularly large raiding party at a place called Lennewarden. The Order suffered a massive defeat at Lennewarden, and as word of the victory by the pagans spread across the region, it sparked another round of rebellions, this time in Oesel, would you believe. Yes, Oesel, the home of pagan pirates which had been under the Christian thumb now for so long that everyone assumed that their rebellious, sea-raiding days were over, decided to throw off their Christian overlords. Poor George, who I presume was not enjoying his tenure as temporary commander of the Teutonic Order in Livonia, was forced to scramble some of his exhausted, depleted troops, and send them over to Oesel, with the main concern being that the pagans would send reinforcements to their new rebel counterparts on the island of Oesel, making it very difficult for the Order to contain the rebellion. Luckily for George it was winter, and towards the end of the year 1260 and in early 1261, George led a contingent of fighters across the ice to Oesel, calling on the Order's Danish allies in northern Estonia to join the Christian fighting force.

The Christian fighting force marched across the ice to Oesel and met the rebels head on in a forest near a place called Carmel. A battle raged for most of the day, with neither side able to gain the upper hand. The next morning George ordered his crossbow men to advance into the forest and attack not only fighting men, but any non-combatants they came across. A grim massacre of women and children by the Christian fighters then took place, and the rebels of Oesel were forced to divert their attentions away from the battlefield as they attempted, largely without success, to protect their civilians. The following day the men of Oesel requested a truce. A peace was brokered and the Latin Christian fighters withdrew from the island, laden down with vast amounts of booty from the many villages they had plundered.

OK, so now there's peace with the rebels on Oesel. But don't get too excited as there are still spot fires of rebellion breaking out across the Baltic region, and things are actually about to get much, much worse for the Order. Grand Master Anno seemed to recognize this and he

was doing his best to scout for new recruits for the Teutonic Order, to fill the depleted ranks of the Order in both Livonia and Prussia. Of course one of the many vacancies caused by the loss of so many men at the battle at Durbe was the Master of the Order in Livonia, and George must have been very relieved to see Master Anno appoint a man called Werner of Breithausen to the position of Master of the Order in Livonia.

Lucky Master Werner arrived in Livonia to take up his position in the autumn of 1262, and he soon realized the extent of the challenges he faced. In addition to the unceasing uprisings which were breaking out across the region, Albert Suerbeer was taking advantage of all the chaos and was aiming a few kicks at the Order while they were down. He was diverting visiting crusaders and putting them to his own use, and was also siphoning money away from the Order.

But Archbishop Albert was actually quite a minor problem compared to the massive problem which was currently brewing in Lithuania. King Mindaugas and his fellow Lithuanian warlords had been observing the rapid decline of the Teutonic Order in the region. Embassies from Samogitia had been meeting not only with Mindaugas but with other military leaders from across Lithuania, with the aim of convincing Lithuania to shake off Christianity and revert back to paganism. Should Lithuania reject Christianity, the Samogitian representatives stated, Samogitia would join forces with Lithuania and they could stage a combined invasion of Livonia. King Mindaugas liked this idea but he didn't like the way in which the Samogitians presented the plan, implying that Samogitia would attack Lithuania if the Lithuanians failed to accept their proposal. Regardless, King Mindaugas reached out to the Russians, and upon discovering that the Russians too would be happy to participate in a combined Lithuanian, Samogitian and Russian invasion of Livonia, and that he (Mindaugas) could lead the resulting large combined army, the deal was sealed. In the autumn of the year 1262 he ejected the Christian priests from Lithuania and began preparing to invade Livonia.

OK, so now things are looking pretty serious. You may well be thinking the same thoughts that Master Werner and the Teutonic Order in Livonia are thinking, that thought being: in order to survive, Livonia is going to need an injection of fighting men. In other words, Livonia is going to need more crusaders. Trouble was, internal strife in both the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of Denmark meant that most of the fighting men of those regions were deciding to remain close to home, so that they could deal with any local strife which may break out.

Oddly, in Denmark the toxic politics of the civil war was continued by two women, who came to dominate state affairs following the death of King Christopher in 1259. King Christopher's widow, a woman named Greta, ruled as Regent on behalf of Denmark's heir, her ten year old

son King Eric. Greta was a hawk rather than a dove, and she clashed repeatedly with both the Church and the rulers of neighboring Schleswig and Holstein, earning herself the nickname "Black Greta". Greta was keen to annex Schleswig to Denmark, but was opposed by another widow, Matilda, who had been married to spooky King Abel, whose ghost was reportedly still currently haunting the Schleswig forests. The two women clashed so fiercely over the future of Schleswig that the Kings of Norway and Sweden intervened to broker a truce. The truce was short-lived, however, and the dispute between the two women deepened when Matilda married a power broker inside the royal court of Sweden, and scored other politically savvy marriages for her eldest children. As a result tensions remained high in Denmark. As William Urban neatly states in his book "The Baltic Crusade", and I quote "Wars, murders, excommunications and peasant unrest kept the Kingdom in constant turmoil, so that no Danish help was available to the hard-pressed crusaders in Livonia." End quote.

So the fighting men of Livonia were pretty much on their own. Fortunately for the Latin Christians of Livonia, King Mindaugas' plan to invade Livonia, and conquer it with the help of his Samogitian and Russian allies, collapsed in a big heap after his Russian allies failed to show up. The Lithuanian army crossed the Daugava into Livonia, but with no sign of the Russians anywhere, and with the local Livonians seemingly uninterested in rising up and throwing off their Teutonic overlords, Mindaugas was forced to withdraw back to Lithuania. It turned out that the Russians had plans of their own. While Mindaugas was busy invading Livonia across its southern borders, the Russians headed north and invaded Estonia, causing the Teutonic Order to scramble to confront this new threat. In the end the Russians were forced back over the border, but not before they had burned much of the city of Dorpat.

Now, not surprisingly considering the stress he must have been under, Master Werner became quite ill at this point in time, and was no longer able to personally lead the Teutonic Knights into battle. So he decided to delegate military command to various Knights, and this ended up working fairly well. Master Werner ordered a contingent of Knights to travel to Kurland with the goal of destroying the strongholds of some of the rebels, and encouraging more of the local Kurs to re-embrace Christianity. The campaign was a success, but while the Order was focusing its attentions on the Kurs, the Samogitians took the opportunity to sneak across the unpopulated coastal regions of Livonia and, taking full advantage of the fact that it was the month of February in 1263 and the shores of the Baltic Sea had frozen solid, a Samogitian army managed to reach Dunamunde, the Latin Christian settlement at the mouth of the Daugava.

As panicked words reached Master Werner in Riga about the arrival of the Samogitians into the heart of Livonia, Master Werner dispatched as many men as he could spare to Dunamunde. They arrived at the settlement and made camp nearby, but around midnight

they were attacked by the Samogitians. What followed was a full-blown battle which took place in the depths of winter, in the middle of the night. It's actually a bit difficult to imagine exactly how this played out. It must have been totally chaotic. Luckily the night was clear and cloudless, and there was enough moonlight for both sides to sort of make out what was happening, but it was understandably difficult to tell the different fighters apart. The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle describes the battle in this way, and I quote: "Though one could not see well to fight, each had to do as best he could in the fighting by the moonlight. Some of the heathens were slain but who can tell the truth, whether friend had not slain friend. The battle took place in the night. The battlefield was red with blood." End quote. When dawn arrived and the dead were tallied it was determined that the Samogitians had emerged victorious. A total of nine Teutonic Knights had been killed. The Samogitians, though, didn't press their advantage. They departed early in the morning, traveling across the ice back into Samogitia.

The next couple of months saw the departure of two of the main players in the conflict. Master Werner, who was not exactly having the time of his life in Livonia to begin with, what with the constant wars, the high stress environment, and his illness, was severely wounded after an apparently insane Teutonic Knight attacked him. He managed to limp back to the Holy Roman Empire to plead with Grand Master Anno to relieve him of his duties. Grand Master Anno acceded to his request, and a replacement master, Konrad of Mandern, was dispatched to Riga.

A few months later, in a shock development, King Mindaugas was assassinated. He had been struggling to deal with various internal squabbling and infighting amongst the Lithuanian warlords, squabbling which was severely limiting Mindaugas' ability to lead the Lithuanians into Livonia to attack the Teutonic Order. In the end, Mindaugas was killed not by one of his quarrelsome warlords, but by a Samogitian. The Samogitian assassins attempted to also kill all the members of Mindaugas' immediate family. One of his sons, however, managed to escape and fled to Livonia, where he converted to Christianity and was, according to William Urban, eventually used by the Teutonic Knights as a pawn in their war against the Samogitians.

So with a new Master in Livonia settling into his role, and with King Mindaugas out of the picture, we will leave the Livonian Crusade in a holding pattern, in the year 1263. Join me next week as we rejoin the Prussian Crusade and examine the effects of the fallout of the Order's defeat in the Battle of Durbe on events in Prussia. Until next week, bye for now.

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