

History of the Crusades. Episode 252. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part 18. The Third Prussian Insurrection.

Hello again. Last week we saw our two crusades merge, as the death of Master Ernst of Livonia, on the battlefield at the hands of the Lithuanians, caused Grand Master Hartmann to appoint a single Master to administer both Livonia and Prussia, that Master being Master Konrad. Master Konrad seemed initially energized and enthusiastic about his new appointment, but reports of setbacks in Semigallia appeared to dull his enthusiasm, and by the summer of 1280 he seemed to be frozen into inaction, seemingly unwilling to venture far from his residence at Elbing. But this episode won't be spent seeing whether Master Konrad can be prodded into action. No, we will leave Master Konrad safely inside the Master's headquarters at Elbing, because we need to go back in time to Prussia and move events along the timeline until they catch up with the appointment of Master Konrad.

Now, when we last left Prussia, in Episode 249, the Second Prussian Insurrection had finally come to an end. The war, which had lasted 15 years, had been fought to the point of exhaustion by both sides. The depleted ranks of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, and the fact that there were no crusaders coming in to assist them, meant that the Order was forced to fight using guerrilla warfare type tactics, using their castles as bases for knights to ride out in small groups, attack some pagans, then wheel around and head back to the safety of the castle. The uprisings of the pagans of Prussia officially ended with the death of the leader of the Natangians, Herkus Monte, in 1273. The situation at the end of 1273 was that the Natangians, the Bartians and the Warmians had all surrendered. The only Prussian pagans who remained to be defeated were the Sudovians, who had allied themselves with the Lithuanians, and were attacking, not the Teutonic Order, but the Natangians and the Bartians, trying to convince them to rise up against the Order once again.

As we've just mentioned, the Order at this point in time was depleted of men, and was basing itself inside individual castles. So it was not in a position where it could mount any sort of attack against the Sudovians, and it was not even in a position where it could defend its newly conquered Prussian subjects. So the Bartians and the Natangians were left to their own devices, and were forced to try to fend off persistent and successful raids by the Sudovians. And they did a really bad job of it. Their efforts were halfhearted at best, and the Sudovians began to make inroads into Natangian territory. Under the leadership of the talented warrior Scumand, the Sudovians even managed to attack and destroy the Teutonic castle of Bartenstein, which was being rebuilt after having been nearly destroyed during the Insurrection. According to legend, the Sudovians were only pushed back after a Natangian woman, a relative of Herkus Monte, flew into a rage and berated her sons for being cowards, and for being hopeless in battle, taunting them that they could not even defend their own people. The sons were embarrassed into gathering some men from the surrounding region, and they ended up forming a sizable army, and leading a charge against the attacking Sudovians, defeating them, and pushing them back over the border. That seemed to mark a turning point. From that time onwards the Sudovians seemed to be happy to remain in Sudovia, and the Order was able to rebuild their castle at Bartenstein.

Now, Grand Master Anno died in 1272, after years of distinguished service, overseeing the Order's activities in the Holy Roman Empire, the Baltic region, and in the Middle East. The Grand Chapter of the Teutonic Order met in July of 1273, and chose a new Grand Master, Hartmann von Heldrungen, and at the same time they confirmed Konrad von Thierberg, a senior castellan who had served as acting Master on many occasions, as the new Master

of the Order in Prussia. Confusingly, another knight named Konrad was appointed to be Marshall of the Teutonic forces in Prussia. To try to reduce the problems this caused, the two men became known as Konrad the Elder, who was Master of the Order, and Konrad the Younger, who was Marshall. Konrad the Elder was ordered to make some inroads against pagan advances, by attacking the Nadrovians.

The Nadrovians lived around the upper reaches of the Pregel River, in a buffer zone between Samland and Sudovia. The Nadrovians were currently aligned with the Sudovians, and the idea was to defeat the Nadrovians, then use Nadrovia as a base to push, not into Sudovia, but northwards into Samogitia, a move which would assist the Livonian Chapter of the Order.

Master Konrad sent the head of the Teutonic Order in Samland, a man named Theodoric, to gather some eager Samlanders and lead them in an attack against two Nadrovia strongholds on the banks of the upper reaches of the Pregel River. The campaign was wildly successful, with the strongholds both taken, and the Samlanders laden down with so much booty from the strongholds that they barely knew what to do with themselves. Eager for more of the same, Theodoric then led an expanded force of heaps of Samlanders, eager to score themselves some more booty, along with 150 Teutonic Knights, to a more distant stronghold deep inside Nadrovia territory. Again the raid was successful, with the Samlanders seizing and destroying the log-and-earth fort, and killing its garrison. Now on a roll, the Knights and Samlanders then decided to take on Nadrovia's main fortress, a structure defended by 200 well-armed Nadrovians. After a hard-fought battle, the Samlanders and Knights prevailed. Not long afterwards Nadrovia itself surrendered to the Teutonic Order.

As a chronicler at the time stated, and I quote, "There were many glorious deeds done against the Nadrovians which are not written in this book, because it would be tedious to describe them one by one. But the Nadrovians had a large, strong army at that time, and many castles. Nevertheless they put aside their hate and surrendered to the Brothers, except for a few who went to Lithuania, and to the present day that part of Nadrovia remains a wilderness," end quote. Interestingly, to the best of my knowledge, that part of Nadrovia remains a wilderness today, like, literally, to now. Superimposing an old map of Nadrovia on Google Earth, as far as I can tell, much of what once was Nadrovia now lies in the south-eastern corner of the Russian territory of Kaliningrad Oblast, where it borders modern day Poland, and much of that region is covered by an area of wilderness known as Park Krajobrazowy, which lies in Poland, but much of which extends into Russian territory. So, there you go.

Now, as we've said, one of the objectives in conquering Nadrovia was to use the region as a base from which the Order could attack Samogitia to the north, but once Nadrovia was conquered it was also clear that it might be the first step in creating another land corridor between Prussia and Livonia. The Order's stronghold at Memel was located on the Samogitian coastline, and should a secure land corridor be created between Nadrovia and Memel, that would enable Memel to be used as a base to attack Samogitia, and really, from Memel it was only a relatively short journey northwards up the Baltic coastline to Kurland, and from there you just needed to travel around the coast a bit further, then travel inland up the Daugava River and you were in Riga. So really, establishing some sort of secure overland travel route between Nadrovia and Memel seemed like the obvious next priority for the Order in Prussia.

So that's what happened. The Teutonic Order pushed northwards out of Nadrovia, while fighters from Memel made their way inland up the Memel River, clearing the way of pagans and attempting to create a secure passageway down which a large army could march in the future, on its way to attacking Samogitia. The first pocket of resistance the Order faced was at a pagan stronghold at Ragnit, which lay to the northwest of Konigsberg, near the coast.

Now, by all reports, Ragnit was a pretty impressive stronghold. The fortress was constructed from logs and rammed earth, and stood on top of a hill. It was large enough to contain a fish pond inside it, stocked with freshwater fish, making it a handy supply of both food and water in case of a siege. It was considered to be impregnable, and in fact had previously withstood an attack by a large Russian army. But despite its reputation, in 1275 Master Konrad ordered Theodoric of Samland to sail up the coast to Ragnit with a force of 1,000 men, with a view to attacking and taking the fortress.

Theodoric sailed northwards, disembarked with his 1,000 men and pile of equipment, and made his way to Ragnit, where he moved into position up the hill upon which the fortress stood, and set up some catapult machines. The defenders posted men along the fortress walls, so that any attempt to scale the walls could be easily repelled. However the exposed defenders soon fell victim to Latin Christian archers, and they were forced back. Missiles from the catapult machines did even more damage to the defenders, and eventually the defenders were forced away from the walls entirely, allowing the attackers to scale the walls and enter the fortress. The men under Theodoric's command killed the defenders, then destroyed the fortress entirely, with a combination of fire and demolition. Deciding that they might as well secure the surrounding region while they were at it, Theodoric's men then went on to attack a nearby fortress, and took that with ease, in a campaign which lasted less than a day.

Now, Ragnit was in a region which lay just to the north of Samland, a region known as Scalovia. Despite the loss of one of their key fortresses, the Scalovians were not prepared to throw their hands into the air and surrender to the Teutonic Order. Instead they went on the offensive, traveling down the coast to the Order's castle at Labiau, attacking it, overcoming its defenders, killing those defenders, and burning the castle to the ground. Not surprisingly Master Konrad decided that this attack couldn't go unanswered, so he ordered a bunch of Teutonic Knights and some Samland fighters to go into Scalovia and teach the pesky Scalovians a lesson.

And that's exactly what happened. The Knights from the Teutonic Order led their forces on a Scalovian killing rampage, burning, plundering, and most especially, killing their way through the Scalovian settlements. The leader of the Scalovians assembled an army and attempted to oppose the Knights, but the army was ambushed by the Christian forces on their approach, and many were killed, with the rest fleeing into the forests. The destruction wrought by the Prussian forces was placing pressure on many Scalovian leaders to come to terms with the Order. However, William Urban reports in his book "The Prussian Crusade" that, while many Scalovian noblemen did approach the Order with genuine offers of surrender, others convinced small groups of knights to accompany them into the forests to talk terms, then killed the knights instead of surrendering. William Urban pointed out that even the Christians who were well versed in the language and culture of the Scalovians had difficulty telling the genuine peace offers from the ambush-setting pretender-surrenderers.

In the end though, events panned out pretty much the same as they had in neighboring Nadrovia. The majority of the people in the region wanted to come to terms with the Order so they could live in peace, and those that couldn't live under the Latin Christian thumb were forced into exile, often moving to join the pagan resistance to the Order in Lithuania.

OK, so Master Konrad has now subdued Nadrovia and Scalovia, and is making his way slowly northwards, securing his land corridor. So, what is his next move? Is Master Konrad going to attack Samogitia? No. While Master Konrad would have loved to attack Samogitia, he couldn't. Why couldn't he? Because the Teutonic Knights from the Teutonic Order were suddenly needed in Pogesania. Why were they needed in Pogesania? Well, because the Third Prussian Insurrection had just started.

Now, Pogesania has been flying under the radar a bit, so let's step back a little and see who the Pogesians were. They were a tribe of Prussians who were located on the Baltic coast, between the Pomesanians and the Warmians. Now, apparently things were all quiet on the Pogesian front until the year 1276, when a new castellan moved into one of the key strategic castles in Pogesian territory. Apparently, unlike his predecessors, this particular castellan was itching for a fight, and went out of his way to seek out and defeat any warlike Prussians he came across. Unfortunately, some of those warlike Prussians happened to be Sudovians, and the leader of the Sudovians, Scumand, was rather put out by this. So he asked the Lithuanians if they wouldn't mind joining him on a rampage through Prussia to teach the Latin Christians a lesson.

The Lithuanians thought this was a terrific idea, so in the year 1277 Scumand led an army of 4,000 Sudovians and thousands of Lithuanians on a Prussian rampage. They didn't attack any major Teutonic strongholds, but they moved through Kulm and down to Marienwerder and then into Pogesania. When the Pogesians and the nearby Bartians realized that the Teutonic Order was struggling to really do anything at all to stop the marauding Sudovians and Lithuanians, they rose in rebellion, attacking Teutonic fighters and Latin Christian interests. They quickly scored some major successes, capturing the castle at Elbing and the stronghold at Christburg. This is what stopped Master Konrad in his tracks, and had him turning his sights away from Samogitia, towards Pogesania.

In the end, the Third Prussian Insurrection was put down nearly as quickly as it started. Theodorich of Samland managed to talk the Warmians and the Natangians down, and their leaders swore new oaths of loyalty to the Order. Then Master Konrad arrived on the scene with the Teutonic army, and immediately began laying waste to regions in and around Pogesania, killing rebellious men and capturing women and children so they could be resettled in more convenient locations, where their activities could be closely monitored. Interestingly, those Pogesian rebels who weren't killed or captured made their way into exile, not to Lithuania but to Samogitia, where they were welcomed with open arms, and put to work preparing for the upcoming expected invasion by the Master of the Prussian Order.

But, unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately for the Samogitians and Pogesians who are busy preparing defenses in Samogitia, the order won't be invading any time soon. No, the Third Prussian Insurrection has shown Master Konrad that there's a threat closer to home which needs to be dealt with first. So, join me next week, as Master Konrad goes to war against the Sudovians. Until next week, bye for now.

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