

History Of The Crusades. Episode 272. The Baltic Crusades. The Livonian Crusade Part 48. The Great Estonian Insurrection Part 1.

Hello again. Last week we saw the commencement of the reign of King Casimir of Poland, and we saw the Samogitian Crusade roll along with no decisive victories or losses on either side of the conflict. This week we return to Livonia.

Now, while we've been crusading in Samogitia, Livonia has been at peace. Ah, lovely, fabulous peace. During these restful years the Livonian Chapter of the Teutonic Order has been kept busy trying to keep the Samogitians from raiding into Kurland and Semigallia, and has also been campaigning in Pskov and Novgorod against Lithuania's Russian allies. We last left Livonia at the end of the civil war in the year 1330, and now we will zoom down back in to Livonia some 13 years later, at the beginning of the year 1343.

Now, as you land down in Riga, the first thing you will notice is that the Teutonic Order seems to be quite at home in the city, and the merchants and citizens of Riga, and the members of the Teutonic Order, seem to be tolerating each other's presence with no problem. You will also notice that there is no Archbishop in Riga. Yes, the Archbishop of Riga is still Archbishop Friedrich, and yes, he is still in Avignon, where he has become, in the words of William Urban in his book "The Livonian Crusade", and I quote, "an embarrassingly permanent fixture," end quote.

The current Master of the Livonian Chapter of the Order is Burchard von Dreileven. You may remember that when we left Livonia at the end of the civil war the Master was Master Eberhard. Master Eberhard ended up resigning his post in the year 1339 to take up a position in Cologne in the Holy Roman Empire. Now, the interesting thing about Master Burchard was that he had been raised in Livonia, and in fact had lived in Livonia for most of his life, his parents having immigrated to Livonia from the Holy Roman Empire when Burchard was a young child. Young Burchard had joined the Teutonic Order and slowly worked his way up the ranks before being appointed as Master, so he had sound local knowledge, solid ties to the local community and to the Livonian Branch of the Order, and was an experienced warrior.

Master Burchard's main priority was to campaign against the pagans in the region. William Urban notes that, while the majority of crusaders ended up traveling to Prussia and joining the Crusade against the Samogitians, a few intrepid crusaders made the longer and more arduous journey to Livonia, where they joined Master Burchard in attacks against invading Samogitians in Kurland and Samland, and in campaigns against the pagan Lithuanians and their allies in the Russian principalities.

In early 1343 when we zoom down on Livonia, Master Burchard is busy waging war against the Principality of Pskov. Three years earlier, shortly after Master Burchard was appointed as Master, a delegation of merchants from Livonia, along with a Russian-speaking member of the Teutonic Order who was acting as their interpreter, made their way to Pskov to discuss trading arrangements. Now, drinks were shared between the attendees as a way to break the ice before the trading talks began. Quite a few drinks actually. Too many drinks, in fact. Instead of relaxing the delegates and encouraging the negotiations to proceed in a friendly and informal manner, the opposite happened. Drunk attendees from both sides became belligerent, and eventually violence broke out, leading to the deaths of several Russians.

This, of course, was a disastrous and unexpected turn of events, which led Pskov to send representatives to Novgorod to request assistance against the merchants from Livonia. However the message that was sent from Pskov to Novgorod was a little misleading. According to William Urban the message stated, and I quote "A German force fully armed is advancing towards Pskov. We bow to you, our masters. Defend us." End quote.

An armed force was duly dispatched from Novgorod, but when it arrived in Pskov, it found no invading Latin Christians whatsoever. The only slightly alarming thing that the men from Pskov could point out was the fact that the Livonian Chapter of the Teutonic Order were busy constructing a massive castle at Neuhausen, which was just over the border from Pskov, in the Bishopric of Dorpat. Incidentally, if you happen to be passing through southern Estonia the ruins of Neuhausen are still visible. They are now at Vastseliina in Estonia, and are pretty impressive. Anyway, the men from Novgorod pointed out that the Latin Christians were entitled to build large castles near the border if they wanted to. To which the commander from Pskov replied that he wanted the force from Novgorod to pop over into the Bishopric of Dorpat to prevent the castle from being built.

Unsurprisingly the commander from Novgorod refused to do this, and instead marched his army back to Novgorod in disgust. The Prince of Pskov decided that he no longer cared for Novgorod as an ally, and offered instead to become one of Gediminas' many Russian vassals. Gediminas agreed, and into the bargain, he promised Pskov that the Lithuanians would join the men from Pskov in an attack on Neuhausen Castle to show those weak-willed Russians from Novgorod how it should be done.

The Prince of Pskov clapped his hands together in delight and the Lithuanian army arrived in Pskov headed up by one of Gediminas' sons, Algirdas. The fighting men from Pskov then joined the Lithuanians in a raid into the Bishopric of Dorpat. The combined forces crossed the border and attacked Neuhausen Castle, managing to kill 300 Latin Christian fighters who had ventured out of the castle to confront the invaders. They didn't manage to take the castle. They did, however, let the Latin Christians know that they were pretty put out by the fact that the castle had been built, because the borders between the territories were pretty fluid at that time, and Pskov was of the view that the castle was actually situated inside their territory.

The result of all this was that, in the winter of the year 1431-1432 Master Burchard gathered a rather large army, fortified it with a bunch of visiting crusaders, and attacked a castle belonging to Pskov, near its border with Lithuania. They didn't manage to take the castle, but they did provide enough show of force to ensure that, when Master Burchard ordered two more castles to be built near the border with Pskov, no-one objected. You might be interested to know that Gediminas' son Algirdas, who incidentally was currently the ruler of Polotsk, made such a successful show of leading his Principality's army against the Order's forces that he eventually ended up ruling not only Polotsk, but Pskov as well. In fact Prince Algirdas is a person to keep your eyes on as he will be popping up later in our narrative.

Early in the year 1343 Master Burchard was still actively campaigning against Pskov. He was organizing a crossing of Lake Peipus when a disturbing message was delivered to him. The disturbing message revealed that a peasant uprising was currently underway in Estonia. Master Burchard abruptly altered his plans. Abandoning his campaign against Pskov, Master Burchard instead set course back to Livonia, where he intended to muster the Teutonic forces before heading to Estonia to put down the insurrection.

Now, while Master Burchard is sailing across the vast length of Lake Peipus heading back to base, we should take a look at exactly why there is currently a peasant uprising in Estonia, as well as what exactly is taking place. The first thing to keep in mind is that we are currently in the 14th century, and the 14th century is well known for the horrors of plague, constant warfare, and peasant uprisings. So Estonia is not alone in having an unhappy underclass which wishes to rebel against its feudal overlords.

Why do the Estonian peasant wish to rebel? Well the problem was that everyone in Estonia was doing really well. Everyone, that is except for the peasants. Trade and agriculture were booming, so merchants and land holders were reaping the benefits and becoming increasingly wealthy, while the hard working peasants, who were providing the labor which created the wealth for the landholders, were not.

Now, you should remember as well that these were no ordinary peasants. These weren't people who had endured countless generations of servitude. No, just a few generations back the peasants of Estonia had been free men: raiding, pillaging, taking to the sea as pirates, taking orders from no one, and using their own wits and fighting skills to acquire whatever they wanted. Discontent had been present within the Estonian peasant population for some time, and in fact quite few delegations of Estonians had traveled all the way to Denmark, over a period of many years, to lodge formal complaints with the Danish monarch, over incidents of rapes and robberies within Estonia, which had met with little or no resistance, or justice, from the Danish rulers. But nothing had come from these meetings, and eventually the Danish court simply resorted to denying an audience to the visiting Estonian complainants. So the peasants of Estonia decided to take matters into their own hands.

Now, whoever was organizing the uprising was pretty smart. Realizing that unplanned, isolated uprisings would likely be doomed to failure, leaders were chosen from separate peasant populations across Estonia, and the uprising was timed in advance to take place on a massive scale across the whole country. What was the ultimate goal of the uprising? Well, at the individual level, the peasants were keen to see their taxes reduced, and their lives of unremitting hardship and labor made a little easier. On the wider level, the peasants ultimately wanted to boot the Germans and Danes out of Estonia, leaving Estonia for the Estonians, and living under some sort of self rule.

The insurrection started on the 23rd of April 1343, when the peasants in the region south of Reval set fire to a house on a hill, which was the signal for the peasants to begin to destroy German assets and to kill any Germans they came across. The uprising quickly spread across northern Estonia, and pretty soon the entire region was full of angry peasants hunting down and killing any German or Danish people they came across, setting fire to their houses and other property and stealing their stuff. By the time Master Burchard had been located on Lake Peipus and had been informed of the event, countless German noblemen and knights had already been killed, and armed crowds of peasants were gathering outside Reval and the major castles in the regions.

As noted previously, whoever had organized the rebellion seemed to know what they were doing. Prior to the commencement of the uprising, word had been sent to Finland on behalf of the peasants requesting assistance, and word may have been sent to Novgorod and Lithuania as well. Master Burchard collected the Teutonic forces in Livonia then headed to the region to the south of Reval, the place where the rebellion had commenced.

The Teutonic Order set up its base at Weissenstein, a town which contained a castle which had been constructed out of limestone, giving the castle a white sort of color, and also giving the castle and the town surrounding it its name, Weissenstein, meaning “white stone” in German. Today, Weissenstein is called Paide, and is the capital of Jarva county in Estonia. The castle is still there. If you would like to visit it, the keep of the castle has been restored and currently houses a museum.

Anyway, Master Burchard established an outpost at Weissenstein, and also made it a place of safety for fleeing Germans or Danes in the area who were seeking shelter. He then sent raiding parties out into the countryside with orders to kill any armed native Estonian person they came across. Once the Teutonic Knights had made their presence felt, Master Burchard summoned four local leaders of the rebellion for peace talks. William Urban notes that it is very difficult to ascertain exactly what took place, as the most detailed account of the rebellion was written nearly two centuries after the events took place, but it seems that the leaders admitted to killing a number of Germans as well as 28 monks from a monastery near Reval. While some negotiations between the leaders and the Teutonic Order seems to have taken place, the end result of the talks was that the Order ended up killing the four rebel leaders. William Urban notes that this was poor form of the part of Master Burchard, as it was likely that the leaders had been granted safe conduct to attend the talks.

With the peasants of the region now leaderless, fighters from the Teutonic Order then fanned out across the countryside, killing and breaking up gangs of rebelling peasants. But, putting down the rebellion wasn't going to be as easy as killing four leaders and dispersing their followers. No, this was actually a really significant uprising, and, as Master Burchard's men were chasing peasants through the Estonian countryside, thousands of armed peasants had made their way to the major town of Reval to the north, and were currently besieging the city.

Join me next week for a showdown between Master Burchard and the Teutonic Order, and the rebelling peasants of Estonia. Until next week, bye for now.

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