

History of the Crusades. Episode 222. The Baltic Crusades. The Prussian Crusade Part IV.  
The Years 1221 to 1226.

Hello again. Last week we met Bishop Christian, the Bishop of Prussia, and we saw him attempt to replicate Bishop Albert's moves in Livonia, with little success. The Prussian pagans were proving more difficult to Christianize than the Letts and Livonians, and with his recent Crusade against the Prussians having failed completely, Bishop Christian is currently recruiting for a new Crusade. Bishop Christian's goal is to use the Crusaders to take the region around the Prussian stronghold of Kulm, and then use the stronghold as a base for Christianizing the rest of Prussia. So all Bishop Christian needs now is a large crusading army to put his plan into action.

Unfortunately, Bishop Christian is finding it quite a challenge to muster a large crusading army. In his book "The Prussian Crusade" William Urban explains why. We discussed briefly in last week's episode the fact that during this period Poland was facing a number of challenges, including floods, crop failures and even an outbreak of the plague. This, of course, made it more difficult to find Crusade volunteers, as did the fact that the Mongols had created a power vacuum in one of the Russian principalities after their victory in the Battle of Kalka River, so powerful Polish Dukes who were looking to expand their territory were currently eyeing off territory in Russia, and weren't that interested in the swampy, boggy lands full of Prussian pagans that Bishop Christian was trying to conquer.

And there is another reason why the powerful dukes of Poland weren't terribly interested in acquiring land in Prussia, that reason being King Valdemar II of Denmark. At this point in time, King Valdemar was at the peak of his power; it would be another couple of years before he would be kidnapped by Henry the Black. So at the moment, the wheels are still very much on the wagon of the Danish King, and he has made no secret of the fact that he wants to conquer land around the Baltic Sea for Denmark. So pretty much everyone was of the view that, as soon as King Valdemar had conquered Estonia, he would then invade the northern coastal regions of Prussia, and work his way southwards, conquering land to the Polish border until all of Prussia was safely under Danish control. So the Dukes of Poland really had no interest in going to the trouble to secure land for themselves in Prussia, only to have to defend it against the powerful all-conquering Danish king at some stage in the future. So this acted as a further incentive against allocating a large amount of men and resources to Bishop Christian's Crusade.

Then there was the papacy itself. You would think that Pope Honorius II, of all people, would be assisting, rather than hindering Bishop Christian's call to arms. But Rome's policy of doing all it could to prevent land grabs in Prussia, and to instead tell everyone that the region was to fall under Papal control, didn't really encouraged the ambitious Polish Dukes to spend their resources on conquering the region. Plus there was the little problem of the Fifth Crusade. The Fifth Crusade was currently underway in Egypt, and it was going very, very badly. Pope Honorius was concerned that if recruitment for a Crusade to Prussia was successful, that would mean that a bunch of crusaders would be diverted instead to Prussia. This wouldn't do it all. So Pope Honorius actually forbade the Polish Dukes from going to pressure to fulfill their crusading vows, instead ordering them to sail to Egypt.

In April of the year 1221 however, Pope Honorius reversed his decision. Deciding that perhaps the Crusade to Prussia would be a good idea after all, he declared that Polish and German crusaders who answered Bishop Christian's called to arms would be awarded the

same dispensations as crusaders who were journeying to the Holy Land. With the Papal green light having been provided, and with Duke Konrad of Mazovia now lending his full support to the venture, Bishop Christian declared that the Crusaders would muster in a village near modern day Warsaw in the summer of 1222, and would then head north to Kulm. The date came around, the Crusaders mustered, and then duly marched north to Kulm. So was this Crusade a success? No, it wasn't. Unfortunately, like the failed Crusade of 1219 or 1220, there is not much information available as to what exactly took place, and why the Crusade failed to meet its objectives, although William Urban speculates that Bishop Christian may have been unable to find volunteers to remain behind in Kulm to garrison the strongholds there.

Bishop Christian himself had no funds to hire mercenaries to undertake this duty. In fact, this failed Crusade left him in a state of financial crisis. He may have been depending on conquering and Christianizing parts of his bishopric, which would have enabled him to collect tithes, but when this failed to eventuate he was left destitute. Luckily for Bishop Christian, Duke Konrad took pity on him and provided him with the income from some villages in Mazovia so that he could support himself temporarily.

So it's safe to say that the Crusades to Prussia haven't been going very well at all. In fact, Bishop Christian's latest Crusade has actually left him in a worse position than he had been in before the expedition. Not only was he now penniless, the Prussians were emboldened by achieving yet another defeat of the heavily armored Latin Christian Knights and crusaders, so any future Crusade was likely to face significant challenges. Bishop Christian knew that simply recruiting for another Crusade and trying the same tactics again would likely result in another failure, so he needed to come up with some new ideas.

Unfortunately, his options were limited. Even if a crusading army under Bishop Christian's leadership ended up successfully invading Prussia, and managed to construct strongholds at strategic locations, it was pretty clear that Polish and German crusaders were unwilling to remain behind in Prussia over winter to garrison these strongholds. Bishop Christian, of course, had no money to hire mercenaries to garrison the castles. And he didn't have the ability either to gift land in Prussia to powerful Polish nobleman in the hope that they would garrison the strongholds themselves. In his book "The Prussian Crusade", William Urban states that Bishop Christian even considered creating a military Order as a means by which he could provide a garrison for his castles, but everyone he spoke to pointed out the difficulties created for Bishop Albert in Livonia by his rogue military Order, The Sword Brothers, and Bishop Christian likely arrived at the conclusion that, even if he created a military order to fix his manpower problem, it might end up creating more problems than it would solve.

But wait, there were military orders already operating in Poland, three of them in fact: the Templars, the Hospitallers, and the Knights of Calatrava. Would they be able to provide men to man the garrison's inside Prussia. Unfortunately for Bishop Christian, the answer to that question was a resounding "No". The Dukes of Poland had repeatedly attempted to engage the three military orders in helping out in the border regions of Pomerelia and Mazovia, but they wouldn't even do that, so the chances of them providing men to invade Prussia and garrison castles there were limited.

One by one, Bishop Christian exhausted every single local solution to his problem. The final nail in the coffin was the fact that in the year 1224, a civil war broke out in the region of Great Poland. It was now absolutely certain that the fighting men of Poland were

focused on matters inside Poland, and no one was interested in Prussia. So that left only one way forward. Bishop Christian would need to look outside Poland to obtain the assistance he required to conquer and subdue his bishopric.

The obvious kingdom to turn to was Denmark, but unfortunately, King Valdemar the second had by this time been kidnapped by Henry the Black, and was currently languishing in a prison inside the Holy Roman Empire. So that left just one option. The Kingdom of Poland's powerful neighbor, the Holy Roman Empire. In the year 1224 Duke Konrad of Mazovia, with the knowledge of Bishop Christian, sent a letter to Hermann von Salza in the Holy Roman Empire, asking him to send an army to Prussia in exchange for the promise of land and castles in Kulm.

Now, if you are scratching your heads and thinking that the name Hermann von Salza sounds familiar, you would be right. Those of you with impressive memories will recall we mentioned in Episode 216 that Hermann von Salza was the man who was sent to negotiate the release of King Valdemar on behalf of both Pope Honorius III and Emperor Frederick II. Now I mentioned back in Episode 216 that Hermann von Salza was the chancellor of the Holy Roman Empire. What I didn't mention in Episode 216 was the fact that Hermann von Salza was also the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights. The fact that he had one foot in the camp of the Holy Roman Empire, and one foot in Rome due to his ties to the Teutonic Knights, made Hermann von Salza a highly influential man, and his skills at high level diplomacy and his ability to mediate and soothe tensions between Pope Honorius and Emperor Frederick were becoming legendary. Hermann von Salza was not only an adviser to Emperor Frederick, but was viewed as his friend and confidante, and also wielded an impressive amount of influence in Rome.

In fact, by the year 1226, Hermann von Salza's list of achievements was really very impressive. Not only had he become the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights and had successfully negotiated the release of King Valdemar II, he had been actively involved in the Fifth Crusade. So actively involved in fact, that he led one of the final offensives of the Crusade in 1221 and as a result was taken prisoner by the Egyptians, and later ransomed. In fact, it is difficult to understate the influence of Hermann von Salza on the politics of the Holy Roman Empire at this time in general, and on the development of the Teutonic Knights in particular. In his book "The Teutonic Knights, A Military History", William Urban has this to say about him, and I quote. "Hermann von Salza was an empire builder of the stamp of a Henry Ford or a John D. Rockefeller, who saw opportunities where others saw only problems and who knew how to work within an existing system to create a new type of empire, using the ability and capital of other men to achieve goals that no one else had dreamed of trying. Because he did this the history of the Teutonic Knights really begins not with the Third Crusade, but with Hermann's election in the year 1210." End quote.

So when the Duke of Mazovia wrote to Hermann von Salza in the year 1224 asking whether he would be interested in crusading in Prussia, I guess it won't surprise anyone to learn that Hermann von Salza, decided that this looked like something worth exploring. Hermann von Salza spent some time informing himself of the situation in Prussia and Poland, and either in the year 1225 or 1226, he sent a delegation to the capital city of Mazovia, a town called Plock, to speak to Duke Konrad about the invitation and to check out the land on offer in Kulm.

Now William Urban, in his book "The Prussian Crusade", advises that this fact finding mission ended up being filled with action and drama. The members of the delegation sent

by Hermann von Salza were, unsurprisingly, all Teutonic Knights, and while they were at the first port of call in their fact finding mission, they ended up having a very close encounter with the facts they had come to find. They were in Plock when word came in to Duke Konrad's court that a bunch of Prussian pagans had raided into Mazovia, and were, in fact, not far from Plock itself. The Duchess of Mazovia asked the Knights to assist her people in battle. So the members of the Teutonic delegation donned their armor, mounted their horses and rode out to give the pagan Prussians the hiding they deserved. Unfortunately, though, it was the Christians, not the pagans, who came off second best in this battle. The Mazovians, many of them cut down by the Prussians as they tried to defend their property, ended up fleeing the battlefield, and the Teutonic Knights themselves only just managed to escape with their lives. William Urban reports that several Knights from the Order were seriously injured, although none were killed. They limped back to Duke Konrad's court to report the defeat.

Oddly, this whole incident seems to have been met with rounds of cheering, backslapping and merriment on both sides. You would think that seeing the Teutonic Knights being resoundingly beaten by the pagan Prussians would have made Duke Konrad think twice about engaging the services of the Teutonic Order, and you would think that nearly losing their lives on their fact finding mission, without even having set foot inside Prussia, would result in the Knights backing slowly away from the offer, shaking their heads and quaking in fear. But no, the opposite happened.

Impressed by the skill, valor and piety of the Knights, Duke Konrad decided that these were exactly the sort of men he would like to send into Prussia, and the Teutonic Knights, plucking arrows out of themselves, binding up the sword slashes on their bodies, and wiping the sweat and blood out of their eyes, decided that this was exactly the type of thing they would welcome more of. So with no further ado, Duke Konrad ordered his scribes to draw up a formal agreement offering lands in Prussia to the Teutonic Order in exchange for military assistance. Bishop Christian himself witnessed Duke Konrad's signature on the document, and the Teutonic Knights happily hauld their wounded bodies back onto their horses so they could take the formal offer back to Hermann von Salza for his consideration.

So will Hermann von Salza accept the offer from Duke Konrad, and launch a Crusade into Prussia? I expect you probably already know the answer to this question, but join me next time anyway, to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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