

Teutonic Order Research Paper

“The religious order (The Teutonic Order) had goals that were more important than either lands or power, but one cannot separate motives easily or neatly. Religious idealism, superstition, ambition, and duties combined in a complex way so that only little did the knights see that their religious duties were best performed against the pagans of northeastern Europe.”¹ The Teutonic Order had its genesis in the chaos of the twelfth century Holy Land as a monastic religious hospital for German crusaders and pilgrims, but within one hundred years had transformed into a military order comparable to the Hospitallers and Templars. Changes in fortune eventually resulted in the Knights leading a crusade against the natives of the Baltic. This long and violent crusade led to the Christianization of the region at the cost of the death of many natives and the rise and eventual decline of the Order as they strayed away from their peaceful religious roots in search of worldly glory.

“The establishment of the Teutonic Order was an act of desperation, desperation based not on a lack of knights, but on a lack of medical care.”² The armies of the Third Crusade had been stricken by illness at the siege of Acre in 1190, and the soldiers were fighting in hostile terrain unlike the more temperate northern climate they were used to. The current hospitals were overburdened and preferred to treat English and French citizens. In response to these conditions, middle class crusaders from the towns of Bremen and Lübeck created a hospital for Germans. This was received well, and eventually the Pope approved them as a new monastic order named “Order of the Hospital of St. Mary of the Germans in Jerusalem” that would live under Templar rule. Seven years later, a new German

1 William L. Urban, “The Early Years of the Teutonic Order,” in *The Prussian Crusade* (Chicago: Lithuanian Research and Studies Center, 2000), Chapter 2. <http://department.monm.edu/history/urban/books/PrussianCrusade2.htm> (accessed May 12, 2012).

2 Urban, *The Prussian Crusade*, Chapter 2.

army with a large representation from Bremen came to the Holy Land and gave large support to the Order. Many knights had converted to a religious life in the order, and this combined with the need for more soldiers to defend the countryside caused the Pope to reincorporate the Order into a military order in 1198.³

Even in the prologue of *The Book of the Order*, the rules and statutes of the Teutonic Order, there is foreshadowing of their later efforts to Christianize by violence. In part two, they claim Biblical origin in the story of Abraham freeing his brother Lot from prison by battle, and how the Holy Ghost revealed that knights should be received with blessings and protections by the Church. In part three, they promise to avenge the crucifixion of Christ and to fight and subject the infidels to Christian rule. A vision by St. John signified that the Church could have knights to drive out its enemies by force. Also referenced are knights in the time of Moses who exterminated all the heathens in the Holy Land, bodyguards of David who killed all of his enemies, and the Maccabees who expelled the pagan Seleucids from the Holy Land. Part four links these references back to the Order, which exterminated its enemies while receiving pilgrims and healing the sick. Part five established the role of the priests of the order, in particular to inspire religious fervor during hostilities.⁴

As there were heathens to fight in other areas of the world besides the Holy Land, the Teutonic Order soon expanded their focus to include Southern Greece, Hungary, and Prussia. They became involved with the Holy Roman Empire as well and had a seat in the Diet. In 1211, the Order was invited by the King of Hungary to establish a presence on the Transylvanian border so he could focus on participating in crusades. The main enemy in the area were the Cumans, a group of pagan nomads who stalled Hungary's efforts at expansion in the area. The Order was very successful in subduing the

3 Urban, *The Prussian Crusade*, Chapter 2.

4 Indrikis Sterns, trans., *The Rule and Statutes of the Teutonic Knights*, 1264 edition in "The Statutes of the Teutonic Knights: a study of religious chivalry," (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1969), http://www.the-orb.net/encyclop/religion/monastic/tk_rule.html (accessed May 12, 2012).

Cumans, and in fourteen years controlled significant territory. The easy defeat of the Cumans convinced the Hungarian nobility that the Order was no longer necessary, and this doubt led to the Order eventually putting itself under the control of the Holy See. This only worked to sour relations with the Hungarians to the point where the Order was expelled from their hard earned lands. Fortunately, the Order had other opportunities to pursue in Prussia.⁵

The change in focus to Eastern Europe in the thirteenth century has its roots in two main causes. The first is the continued failure of crusading efforts in the Holy Land. The Fourth Crusade ended disastrously in the sacking of Constantinople, the Fifth Crusade ending in the failure to capture Cairo, and the crusaders were eventually expelled from the Holy Land when the final bastion of Acre was lost in 1291. The Holy Land was no longer a practical destination for crusades, but there were still rulers who desired the potential riches and glory that came along with crusading. At the same time, the people of Germany had been slowly expanding eastward into Slavic lands. Sometimes this was at the request of local lords, and sometimes it was through conquest.

The lands of Livonia had been experiencing constant warfare for centuries, from Viking raids to Russians and Lithuanians conquest attempts, and therefore had well defended wooden and earthen fortifications. German merchants wanted peaceful access to markets, but experienced mistrust and fear from the natives as missionaries often came along with the trade. In 1186, an Augustinian friar named Meinhard was granted permission from Polotsk's Russian lord to establish a church. After a Lithuanian raid, Meinhard offered to build two stone forts on the condition that the Livs converted to Christianity and pay tithes. They accepted, but refused to convert once the forts were completed. Not only did they refuse to reimburse him, but did not allow him to leave the country out of fear that he would return with an army. Meinhard was named bishop for his efforts, and his successor Berthold

5 Matthew Haywood, "The Teutonic Order", Wargaming and Warfare in Eastern Europe, http://www.warfareeast.co.uk/main/Teutonic_Order.htm (accessed May 13, 2012).

received papal permissions to preach a crusade in 1197. Due to flaws in the pagan's societal structure, mainly an aversion to powerful authority and the inability to raise the necessary income via taxes to fight a war, the crusaders were successful in their invasions. Weaker tribes were conquered first and assimilated into Christianity. A military order called the Order of the Swordbrothers was created during this period and assisted in the conquests, and would later be assimilated by the Teutonic Order.⁶

A crusade was proclaimed against the Prussians in 1217, and by 1225 Duke Conrad of Massovia was requesting assistance from the Order against the Prussians as they were causing trouble on Conrad's northern borders. The Order was given guarantees that any conquered land would be under their control, which would be imperial fiefs under the Holy Roman Empire. Within the space of fifty years, the Order conquered many of the Prussian, Latvian, and Estonian tribes in the area. In addition, the Order of the Swordbrothers was assimilated into the Teutonic Order in this time, extending its influence farther into Estonian and Livonian lands. A feudal structure was established in conquered lands. Knights were allowed to directly participate in trade, something that was against their original vows of poverty as part of joining the Order. They were even given a monopoly on the grain trade. The need for manpower to protect their lands caused a large burden for the local population, which had an agriculture based economy. Necessary conscription resulted in frequent rebellions. Enslavement of pagan prisoners was seen as completely acceptable, as non-Christians were not given equal rights. "Women and children were taken captive; What a jolly medley could be seen: Many a woman could be seen, Two children tied to her body, One behind and one in front; On a horse without spurs Barefoot had they ridden here; The heathens were made to suffer: Many were captured and in every case, Were their hands tied together They were led off, all tied up - Just like hunting dogs."⁷ Ironically,

6 William Urban, "A Historical Overview of the Crusade to Livonia", The ORB: On-line Reference Book for Medieval Studies, <http://www.the-orb.net/encyclop/religion/crusades/cruurban.html> (accessed May 13, 2012).

7 Guy Stair Sainty, "The Teutonic Order of Holy Mary in Jerusalem", Chivalric Orders,

this resulted in a lack of conversion efforts among prisoners, as if they had converted to Christianity then they would need to be paid or given land. The local populations converted to avoid the fate of the prisoners, and the Order found it increasingly hard to find new soldiers without harming the peasant base from which it drew most of its revenue.

The success of the Order against the northern tribes caused the southern tribes to start co-operating with each other, and as a result were able to resist the advances of the Order much more effectively. Until 1343, Poland lent its support to the Lithuanians, which turned the conflicts with the Order from conquest into a series of raids and counter raids. The Order used this time to consolidate its Prussian territories and build over a dozen fortifications. In 1343, the Polish king sided with the Order, and the loss of Polish aid to the Lithuanians allowed the Order expand greatly into Lithuania and defeat their armies. Fighting and political manipulation continued until 1386 when the Lithuanian Grand Duke became king of Poland with the commitment to Christianize the Lithuanians. At this moment, the Order had lost its reason for being in the Baltic as all the peoples had now become Christian, though it remained at the peak of its power for another twenty-five years. In 1410, the Order was defeated badly by the Polish and Lithuanians at the Battle of Tannenberg. The peace treaty that resulted was the beginning of the end for the Order, as it lost conquered Lithuanian lands and was forced to pay huge war indemnities and ransoms. To pay for them, the Order was forced to raise harsh taxes and did not have the funds to rebuild its military. The harsh taxes drove areas colonized by German settlers into revolt, which was a much more dangerous situation than revolt by the unorganized Prussians. The Order used mercenaries to quash the revolt, but the remaining rebels bribed the Polish king into attacking the Order. The Order's mercenaries ransomed cities under their control to the highest bidder, who was usually the Polish, to gain their unpaid wages. The peace treaty

signed after thirteen years of war was the undoing of the Order. They had to cede Eastern Prussia to the Polish, which included the Order headquarters. They also had to recognize the King of Poland as their feudal lord and Western Prussia was a fief held in his name.⁸

The Order's increasingly secular focus and expansionist tendencies caused it to gain power as it expanded its focus from the Holy Land to the land of Eastern Europe. While it held much land, once the Poles and Lithuanians defeated its forces it quickly crumbled. Its harsh treatment of non-Christians and exploitation of local peoples meant that revolts were common whenever the Order was weak. The Order survived the takeover by the Polish, and eventually reverted back to its original status as a

8 Haywood, "The Teutonic Order"