

The First Cold War: On the Teutonic Knights and Alexander Nevsky

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The era of the Crusades stands as a particularly intriguing and enduring period in the turbulent times of the Middle Ages. Such heroic (and often tragic) tales about the adventures of intrepid knights have entranced students of history since Pope Urban II's epoch-making call to arms. But in popular sentiment, the Crusades are inseparable from the stage of the Holy Land; the connotations of the term summon the images of valiant knights, their armor adorned with the image of the Cross, locked in grueling combat with a sea of Muslims at the gates of the Holy City of Jerusalem. While the early crusades had to do with the Holy Land, the venue was not a prerequisite for a crusading enterprise. In fact, the lands of Europe were to act as hosts for some of the more fascinating undertakings of the period. Lands a stone's throw from the Holy See in Rome soon became the theaters of war, and skirmishes that would decide the fates of entire nations were waged within their borders. Of all the European Crusades, however, the saga that unfolded in Russian lands remains the most mesmerizing, epic, and salient to the future of a people. The Crusade in the Russian lands was waged by the ubiquitously-feared Teutonic Knights who, as we shall see, had myriad reasons for striking when and where they did. This momentous event culminated in the celebrated Battle on the Ice, a happening that brought to the fore Russia's arch-hero, Grand Duke Alexander Nevsky. It also served to isolate Russia from the rest of the Occident. To be sure, both of these ramifications wielded tremendous influence on Russia's subsequent development.

The Order of the Teutonic Knights

The Teutonic Knights, the last of the major military orders to be formed, does not possess a myth of ancient founding as do the Knights

Templar and Hospitallers.¹ Their own tale of establishment is recorded in the *Book of Order*, the official handbook of the Teutonic Knights:

In the year eleven hundred ninety from the birth of our Lord, at the time when Acre was being besieged by the Christians and, with God's help, was won back again from the hands of the infidels, at that very time there was in the army a band of good people from Bremen and Lubeck who, through the charity of our Lord, took pity on the manifold needs of the sick in the army and started the [Hospital of St. Mary of the German House of Jerusalem] under the sail of a ship, called a "cog," under which they brought the sick with great devotion and cared for them with zeal.²

Then, at a festive ceremony that supposedly transpired on March 5, 1198, the Order underwent a change in purpose: the diminution of the role of hospitals, and a correlating re-focus on a military function. The list of attendance reads like a who's who of the medieval world: the Patriarch of Jerusalem, the head of the Crusading army, and the Grand Masters of the Templars and Hospitallers. All partook in this ceremony, which marked the inception of the Teutonic Knights as a military order. Pope Innocent III penned a bull, dated February 19, 1199, which confirmed the event and decreed that the Teutonic Order would care for the ill according to the bylaws of the Hospitallers and engage in military operations according to the Templar code. The brethren were instructed to drape themselves in the distinctive white cloak of the Templars, with a black cross emblazoned on the garment to differentiate the Teutons from the Templars.³

The Teutonic Knights adopted a hierarchical structure patterned after the Templars and the Hospitallers. At the apogee stood the *Hochmeister (Magister Generalis)*, under whom

were the *Landmeister*, who ruled at the national level, the *Landkomtur*, in charge of provinces, and the *Komtur*, the local rulers.⁴ The *Hochmeister* was served by a Grand Council, which was comprised of the *Grosskomtur*, the *Ordenmarschall*, the *Spitler* (Hospitaller), the *Tressler* (treasurer), and the *Trapier* (quartermaster). The *Hochmeister* and the Grand Council were elected by the General Chapter, which convened in the month of September, during the Feast of the Holy Cross.⁵ This organization is ostensibly modeled after the feudal arrangement prevalent in medieval society. Another comparison can be made to a modern corporation. The General Chapter can be likened to shareholders, the *Hochmeister* to a chairman, and his Grand Council as a type of Board of Directors. And while this board of directors wields a great deal of power, it is still answerable to the collective leadership of the shareholders. So it was with the Order of the Teutonic Knights.

The Teutonic Knights, in attempts to justify its existence to the populace, as well as goad individuals to join the Order, churned out numerous chronicles chock-full of religious rhetoric and crusading propaganda. These tomes were penned for an audience of prospective members and donors. Despite the Order's main role as a military association, however, the literature was principally concerned with the group's spirituality rather than their exploits on the field of battle. Nonetheless, these seemingly conflicting concepts compliment one another; an army's success in battle was thought to be a product of its spirituality, and not its acumen.⁶

One such chronicle that was filled with the Order's ideology was the epic *Karl*, which was itself adapted from Konrad's *Rolandslied*. Nearly all of the Order's tenets are included in this tome, which rendered it invaluable for proliferating the philosophy of the Order. Brothers and prospective brothers were therefore encouraged to read the work, so that they might be infused with the holy sentiment required of a knight of Christ.⁷ The epic draws numerous parallels between the Teutonic Knights and the Hebrews of the Old Testament in an endeavor to color the institution as one

avored by God.⁸ *Karl* also goes on to convey the official line of the Church that anyone taking the Cross would be granted indulgences, and that the Crusade is a divinely-ordained enterprise with the design of augmenting God's earthly kingdom.⁹ Certainly such works, while written to elucidate key principles of the Order, contributed much to the world of literature, and could be enjoyed on their own account.

The Teutonic Order was heavily associated with a cult of saints, and this had immense influence on how the Order was perceived. The Order, naturally, had a connection with St. George, patron saint of Germanic lands, but it was, in fact, the female saints who were most venerated by the brethren. This is also true of the Templars, although their ardor was not as great.¹⁰ Of course, the Teutonic Knights labored to procure relics, and one of their most cherished possessions was the head of St. Barbara, "which they had carried off from the Pomeranians in a raid on the castle Sartowitz in the 1240s."¹¹ Those who participated in the raid swear that the saint purposefully abandoned her former resting place in order to be among the members of the Order, witnessing their "great spirituality."¹²

The Order, while it revered all the great holy figures, extolled one above all others: the Blessed Virgin Mary. Along with the Knights Templar, the Teutonic Knights claimed Mary to be their special patroness, but the Teutonic Knights' devotion far exceeded even that of the brothers of the Temple. In fact, the Order's fervor in lauding the Blessed Virgin became its most well-known feature, and this seems to have had a decidedly positive affect on the populace's perception.¹³ Furthermore, the Order's laudation of Mary was a factor in its decision to launch a campaign of expansion in Eastern Europe (see below). The figure of Mary was widely associated with Eastern Europe, much in the same way that Christ was seen to have a special affiliation with the Holy Land. The Blessed Virgin's relationship apparently stems from her connection with the Pole Star—as sailors looked to the Pole Star for guidance, so should mankind look to her to show the way. The Pole Star is evidently bound with Eastern Europe because of its north-eastern location.

The Order made use of this belief, stressing their ties to Mary to warrant their journeys into Prussia and beyond.¹⁴

The Teutonic Knights' meteoric rise to power is due in large part to the slew of donations made to their organization following the papal decree formally recognizing them as a military order. Their patrons were prominent members of the clergy and eminent secular lords, including Archbishop Theodoric of Trier, Gilbert of Zottegem, and Henry Halverrogge. The bulk of these donations were hospitals, following the Order's original and mission.¹⁵

In addition to the donation of hospitals, the Order's lot greatly benefited from the auspices of the Holy Roman Emperors. The Order never threatened to eclipse the Templars or the Hospitallers in the Holy Land in terms of wealth or power, but it held primacy within the expanses of Europe itself, especially the German lands. Indeed, nearly all of the Order's property was within Germany, and nearly all of its members had German blood flowing through their veins.¹⁶

The Order despaired of ever attaining parity with the Templars in the Holy Land, and so the Knights began to re-focus their gaze closer to home. The Order's *Hochmeister*, Herman von Salza (1210-39), generally regarded as the greatest of the grand masters, was integral to the targeting of the Order's energies to the European realm.¹⁷ The Order's motive in pursuing this path was the establishment of autonomous states under its direct control and under the supervision of the pope. The Order therefore waged war for power, land, and prestige, while the pontiff extended his blessing because of his potential influence in the newly converted territories.¹⁸

The Teutons prevailed in several decisive victories early in their campaign. In 1211, the King Andrew II of Hungary approached the Order with a proposition: his eastern border was incessantly threatened by pagan Cumans, and he desired the Teutons to colonize the area in order to rout the heathen menace. The Order endeavored to do so, and in fact achieved a marked success. Too successful, according to King Andrew. Alarmed that the Knights had grown too puissant and were subverting his

authority, he expelled them from the territory in 1225. As fate would have it, another ruler was being terrorized by pagans in another domain. Conrad of Mazovia, a Polish duke, required succor in quelling the heathen Prussians. Herman von Salza was more than willing to come to Conrad's aid, but he balked out of fear of another expulsion. In order to ascertain that this would not transpire, the Teutons obtained a charter from the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II granting them all lands promised by Conrad, in addition to any they could conquer from the Prussians. Confident in the security of their holdings the Order marched on, subduing all who stood in their path.¹⁹ The inexorable march towards Russia had begun.

The Situation in the Baltic

The reasons to target the lands of Russia in a Crusading enterprise were manifold. First, the peoples of Russia did not acknowledge the Pope as God's emissary on Earth, nor did they embrace the tenets of Catholicism. The lands of Rus' instead subscribed to the Greek Orthodox variety of Christianity. This had been the case since Prince Vladimir converted to the Orthodox religion in 988 after much deliberation.²⁰ This decision, one of the utmost import for the future of the Russian lands, was the result of a systematic examination of numerous religions. The first group to pay Vladimir a visit were Muslim Bulgarians; they exhorted Vladimir to accept their doctrine. Vladimir inquired as to the details of their dogma, and the Bulgarians enlightened him. Vladimir scoffed at their tenets, "for circumcision and abstinence from pork and wine were disagreeable to him."²¹

Next, a band of Germans arrived in the stead of the Pontiff. They exclaimed to Vladimir:

Thus says the Pope: "Your county is like our country, but your faith is not as ours. For our faith is the light. We worship God, who has made heaven and earth, the stars, the moon, and every creature, while your gods are only wood."²²

Vladimir, intrigued, asked the Germans to further expound upon the religion. Fasting as much as one is able, they said, is to the glory of

God. This perturbed Vladimir, for the concept of fasting was alien to him. He bade the Catholics to depart.²³

The Jewish Khazars next received word of Vladimir's search, and so descended upon the region of Rus'. They edified him in the ways of their teachings, but Vladimir once again took issue with abstention from pork and circumcision, and ergo Judaism was dismissed as a possibility.

Finally, just as Vladimir began to despair at finding a suitable religion, the Greeks arrived on the scene, and they praised, "their words were artful, and it was wondrous to listen and pleasant to hear them."²⁴ A delegation sent to investigate the respective worship services further strengthened Vladimir's favor with the Greeks:

... We went among the Germans, and saw them performing many ceremonies in their temples; but we beheld no glory there. Then we went to Greece, and the Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven on or earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men...²⁵

Thus, Vladimir came to choose Greek Orthodox as his people's religion, and verily, it seemed a match made in heaven. Naturally, Vladimir's choice vexed the Pope, for he was keenly aware of the influence lost in the region. The hope of swaying the Russians to look to the Holy See for spiritual guidance played no small part in the selection of the area for a Crusade. The Teutonic Knights were to establish dominion over the Russian principalities, and the pope would exercise spiritual control over the subjugated peoples.

Another factor that played into the selection of Russia as an objective was the debilitation fomented by the Tatar Yoke. The invasion by the warmongers enfeebled economic centers, scattered the population, and emasculated military forces. Seeing Russia thus vulnerable, avaricious Western powers began a campaign to carve out portions of Rus' for themselves. The Swedes, under the banner of Earl Birger, invaded Novgorodian territory in July 1240. They were repulsed by an audacious soul called Alexander

at the Neva River.²⁶ To signify this decisive victory, Alexander attached the surname "Nevsky," thus rendering his full name Alexander Iaroslavich Nevsky.²⁷ The exploits of Alexander will be covered at length below.

A third and final condition in the Baltic that contributed to its selection as the venue for a Crusade, was its political fragmentation. The cause of this fragmentation was economic; specifically, it was the fur trade that bustled in the area. In order to maintain the monopoly enjoyed by Russia in this market, a prince would be compelled to raid, raze, and haunt the surrounding peoples until they yielded and relinquished their furs.²⁸

This lack of political cohesion ensured the Teutonic Knights easy victories over feeble, divided rulers (or so they believed).

The Battle on the Ice

The force of destiny compelled the Teutonic Knights to march onward towards Lake Peipus, their Waterloo. The army was now a hodgepodge of peoples: the Teutonic Knights themselves, commanded by the Livonian *Landmeister*, Danes under princes Canute and Abel, Germans united behind Bishop Hermann of Dorpat, and Russian forces following Jaroslav (in exile).²⁹ They marched relentlessly into Novgorodian territory. Each group had the fervent hope of carving a fragment of Russia for itself.

In September of 1240 the force arrived at Izborsk, and hastily captured it.³⁰ Then, according to the Nikonian Chronicle:

When these tidings that the Germans had taken Izborsk arrived in Pskov, the entire city marched against them, and there was a fierce battle. There was great carnage among them. The Germans killed voevoda Gavril Goreslavich, and defeated the people of Pskov, slaying many in pursuit, and others they captured. And they chased them to the city, setting fire in the suburbs; and there was much evil.³¹

The host continued on its bloody campaign. By April of 1241 a retinue of Teutonic Knights, Danish vassals, and native Estonians had conquered lands east of Narva. They quickly constructed a fortress at Kopore, and from this point launched audacious raids, at times coming

within twenty miles of Novgorod.³² The Order was so certain of imminent victory that Bishop Hermann was sent to the Pope to request the bishopric of the yet-to-be-conquered lands.³³

Alexander was vehement in his opposition to the Teutonic presence. This was due to many factors, including his patriotism, piety, and love of peace, but ulterior motives are also relevant. Throughout his reign, Alexander prospered under the auspices of the Orthodox Church. He had a bond with a certain Metropolitan Krill, and they mutually bolstered each other's position. Should the Teutonic Knights have succeeded in their endeavor and founded a papal state, the foundation of Alexander's rule would crumble.³⁴

Late in 1241, Alexander opted to strike Kopore to bring an end to the debilitating raids. He routed the garrison, and "he destroyed the city to its foundations, slew Germans and brought some to Novgorod; others he permitted to go to the German land because he was merciful above measure."³⁵

The Teutonic occupation of Pskov greatly perturbed Nevsky, and so he purposed to liberate it from their grasp. On March 5, 1242, Alexander "occupied all the roads to Pskov and then unexpectedly, entered Pskov and captured the Germans, the Chud' and the German administrators, sent them in chains to Novgorod, and liberated the city of Pskov from captivity."³⁶ A German chronicler describes the episode:

He marched toward Pskov with many troops. He arrived there with a mighty force of many Russians to free the Pskovians and these latter heartily rejoiced. When he saw the Germans he did not hesitate long. They drove away the two Brothers, removed them from their advocacy and routed their servants. The Germans fled . . . If Pskov had been defended, Christianity would be benefited until the end of the world. It is a mistake to conquer a fair land and fail to occupy it well . . . The king of Novgorod then returned home.³⁷

On the return to Novgorod, Alexander's forces were impeded at a bridge by the forces of Bishop Hermann. Alexander led his army in a strategic retreat, but the Prelate's forces met with the remainder of the Teutonic army and

pursued him. On April 5, 1242, the two hosts commenced warfare on the banks of Lake Peipus—the Battle on the Ice. The Occidentals had an army of some two thousand men, and the Russians six thousand. This disparity was for the most part balanced by the Teutons superior armaments.³⁸

According to the Nikonian Chronicle:

It was Saturday and the sun was rising when the two hosts clashed. The Germans and the Chud', being in a formation shaped like a pig, thrust through the [Russian] regiments, and there was an evil and great battle for the Germans and the Chud'. There were tremors from the breaking lances and there was noise of swords clashing. They moved over the frozen lake but the ice could not be seen because it was all covered with blood..

The [heavenly Russian] warriors heaved their shoulders and slashed their swords, moving as if on air; and the others had no refuge whither to flee, and they were pursued for seven versts on the ice, up to the Subolich shore. Five hundred Germans were killed there, and an endless number of Chud'. Fifty important Germans were captured — powerful commanders — and they were brought to Novgorod. Some others drowned in the water, and some, gravely wounded, escaped . . . And the name of Grand Prince Aleksandr Iaroslavich began to spread through all lands... and so he came to Novgorod with great victory.³⁹

At this battle, the fearsome Teutonic Knights were defeated, and Alexander ensured that his people would not kowtow to the Occident.

The Aftermath

Although the Battle on the Ice was a bitter defeat for the Teutonic Order, it did not have any long-term negative ramifications on the Order itself. Only twenty-six brothers were lost—twenty were slaughtered, and six taken prisoner by Nevsky. The real damage dealt by the debacle was that it forced the Order to abandon its hopes of further eastern expansion.⁴⁰

The most important result of the Battle of the Ice is that Russia was able to avoid being shackled under Western domination. (Of course, they had to brook Eastern domination, but that is another tale entirely). In many ways, Western Europe simply "forgot Russia's

existence and no longer considered her part of the European Christian community.⁴¹ The Battle on the Ice caused Russia to be isolated from the rest of the Occident, and therefore prevented it from participating in the events that shaped the Western consciousness. Had the Teutonic Knights triumphed and been able to maintain an orderly state, Russia may well have experienced the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Reformation, and other such momentous happenings that are so integral to the formation of modern Occidental society. As it stands, however, Russia did not take part in these occurrences, and is ergo an anomaly in the world: not quite Western, not quite Eastern, but a nation all its own. Many Russians view this battle as the decisive moment in their nation's development—the moment when Russia prevailed against the tyranny of the West.⁴²

After the Battle on the Ice, with the Western forces decisively routed, Alexander was compelled to ruminate upon the future of his realm. The Tatars inexorably pushed into the region, and he had to decide whether to resist or yield. Resistance was a bloody path, Alexander knew, and the inevitable defeat it promised would bring an end to his reign and to Russian culture. Should he agree to the Tatar's terms, however, he would be guaranteed limited autonomy, and the Tatar's would allow the Russians to maintain their cultural independence. Alexander sagaciously chose the latter option, placing Russia in ephemeral chains but forging a key for future freedom.⁴³

And perhaps because this event is so very salient, the architect of its victory—Alexander Nevsky—has risen to become the Arch-Hero of the Russian people. His exploits were rendered—albeit somewhat propagandized—into one of the greatest films of all time (Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*). His heroism is captured in a masterpiece of music—Prokofiev's score for the aforementioned film. And his name was invoked by Stalin in Russia's darkest hour, when Hitler and his *Wehrmacht* were threatening Moscow itself. And perhaps most fittingly of all, he is officially recognized as a saint by the Russian Orthodox Church,⁴⁴ the very church he saved through his deeds.

Conclusion

The Teutonic Knights were a powerful military order that abandoned the Holy Land in favor of Eastern Europe, partly because of its ethos and partly because of conditions in the region. This puissant force was halted in its expansion by Alexander Nevsky at the Battle on the Ice, a battle which served to forever separate Russia from the rest of the Occident, for good or for ill. The development of Russia and ergo the world would have been drastically different had the Teutons prevailed in that bloody debacle. Because of his resilience, Alexander Nevsky is revered as one of Russia's greatest rulers, and his memory continually brings hope and inspiration to his people. The Teutonic Knights worked to improve the world by their methods, and they have in many ways bettered it. Still, while they are called crusaders, the principles of that breed are best exemplified by Alexander Nevsky: courage, zeal, and love for a higher ideal.

End Notes

¹Helen Nicholson, *Templars, Hospitallers, and Teutonic Knights: Images of the Military Orders 1128-1291* (Leicester, England: Leicester University Press, 1995), 115.

²Indrikis Sterns, trans., "The Rule and Statutes of the Teutonic Knights;" available from; Internet; accessed 14 April 2001.

³Eric Opsahl, "The Teutonic Order;" available from: <<http://orb.rhodes.edu/encyclop/religion/monastic/opsahl1.html>>; Internet; accessed 14 April 2001.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Desmond Seward, *The Monks of War: The Military Religious Orders* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 95+97.

⁶Nicholson, 106.

⁷Mary Fischer, *Di Himels Rote: The Idea of Christian Chivalry in the Chronicles of the Teutonic Order* (Goppingen, Germany: Kummerle Verlag, 1991), 73.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 74-77.

¹⁰Nicholson, *Templars, Hospitallers, and Teutonic Knights*, 116.

¹¹Ibid., 118.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 116-117.

¹⁴Fischer, 133-134.

¹⁵Helen Nicholson, ed., *Welfare and Warfare*, vol. 2 of *The Military Orders* (Aldershot, Great Britain: Ashgate Press, 1998), 75-78.

¹⁶Nicholson, *Templars, Hospitallers, and Teutonic Knights*, 3.

¹⁷Thomas F. Madden, *A Concise History of the Crusades* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 140.

¹⁸Myron Gruenwald, *One Cubit of Stature: The Story of the Order of the Teutonic Knights*, (Hubertus, Wisconsin: by Guyle O'Connell, 1985), 16.

¹⁹Ibid., 140-141.

²⁰Daniel H. Kaiser and Gary Marker, eds., *Reinterpreting Russian History: Readings 860-1860s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 63.

²¹Ibid., 65.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 66.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Serge A. Zenkovsky, ed. and trans. and Betty Zenkovsky, trans., *The Nikonian Chronicle: From the Year 1241 to the Year 1381*, vol. 3 (Princeton: The Kingston Press, Inc., 1986), xiv.

²⁷Seward, 105.

²⁸Eric Christiansen, *The Northern Crusade*, 2d ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 45.

²⁹William Urban, *The Baltic Crusade*, 2d ed. (Chicago: Lithuanian Research and Studies Center, Inc., 1994), 195.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Zenkovsky, 8.

³²Urban, 196.

³³Ibid.

³⁴John Fennell, *The Crisis of Medieval Russia, 1200-1304* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1983), 112.

³⁵Zenkovsky, 10.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Urban, 197.

³⁸Ibid., 198.

³⁹Zenkovsky, 11-13.

⁴⁰Christiansen, 135.

⁴¹Zenkovsky, xv.

⁴²"Alexander Nevsky," *Encarta Online*, available from: <http://encarta.msn.com/find/Concise.asp?z=1&pg=2&ti=761558828>; Internet; accessed 14 April 2001.

⁴³Fennell, 114.

⁴⁴"Alexander Nevsky."

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Map of the Occident and Lands of Rus' [1220]

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