



Teutonic Knights

William L. Urban

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The Teutonic Knights were powerful and ferocious advocates of holy war. Their history is suffused with crusading, campaigning and struggle. Feared by their enemies but respected by medieval Christendom, the knights and their Order maintained a firm hold over the Baltic and northern Germany and established a formidable regime which flourished across Central Europe for 300 years.

This major new book surveys the gripping history of the knights and their Order and relates their rise to power; their struggles against Prussian pagans; the series of wars against Poland and Lithuania; the clash with Alexander Nevsky's Russia; and the gradual stagnation of the order in the fourteenth century. The book is replete with dramatic episodes - such as the battle on frozen Lake Peipus in 1242, or the disaster of Tannenberg - but focuses primarily on the knights' struggle to maintain power, fend off incursions and raiding bands and to launch crusades against unbelieving foes. And it was the crusade which chiefly characterized and breathed life into this Holy Order.

William Urban's narrative charts the rise and fall of the Order and, in an accessible and engaging style, throws light on a band of knights whose deeds and motives have long been misunderstood.

Teutonic Knights Details

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Author : William L. Urban

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Andrew Davis says

Very well balanced. Presents Teutonic Knights within wider perspective of their goals and historical surroundings in the Eastern Europe. Covers a lot of material within a small volume. It does require additional references to follow up the discussion.

The closing sentence best represents the tenor of the book. "Above all, we should remember that historians who simplify the complexity of the past too much do a disservice to future generations who must live with the impressions their work makes on readers".

Another interesting quote from early in the text - Work is the cure for poverty, vice and boredom (Voltaire - Candide)

Jay says

Solid, but the non-linear timeline was annoying.

Ryan Yoder says

A good historical overview.

The book is the first I've read on this topic. It does well at informing. The names and dates can get laborious but the first read through gives excellent highlights and historical connections that gives one a picture of the Teutonic Knights place in history.

Ellis Knox says

Excellent history written by an excellent historian. Between Christensen and Urban, we have a depth of understanding of the eastern crusades far greater than enjoyed by earlier generations.

Urban's prose is easy and engaging. The subject matter, of course, is riveting. This is indispensable reading for anyone studying the Knights, the eastern crusades, or Eastern Europe in the later Middle Ages generally.

Jihrke says

I applaud the author's knowledge of this period. His comments on the period in general and the Battle of Tannenberg in particular are interesting and insightful, however, like many military history books, a good deal of "The Teutonic Knights" defaults to an endless list of names, places and dates that become incomprehensible after a time. The style of writing is straight forward, and while the author tries to fill out

the personalities with background information, it ultimately fails because of the weight of the material. There is simply too much going on and the diplomatic relations are far too complex for a short book. The period really needs a book of 1298 pages instead of 298 which is the length of this book. That said, I would still recommend "The Teutonic Knights" as one of several volumes on the subject. If you are interested in the Teutonic Knights and the early history of Prussia, this book is a valuable addition to your library.

Thom says

A Good read over a little covered part of history (in the USA) it helps make sense of the Baltic region and why the USSR thought the region was theirs. Also why there are so many german names in countries you would think were Slavic

Owen says

Not as engaging or interesting as some of the histories of the Knights Templar or Knights Hospitaller. The focus more on the military aspect makes sense, as unlike the other orders the Teutonic Knights were in near continuous warfare on crusades against pagans in Eastern Europe. In a sense, it became a 'safe' crusade, offering the noble pursuit of chivalry, a code of behavior taken to ever more romanticized and unrealistic heights. Despite it being a book on the Knights, the situation's complexities require a rather thorough explanation of how the local cultures functioned. Copious detail explains the myriad truces, papal officials, backstabbing, and political games that went on. There is an abundance of maps to explain major changes in control of the region, and the castle of Marienburg is described in excellent detail.

The biggest problem with this book is the sheer complexity of politics in the region. From the Piast dynasty, Rus' princes, pagan tribes, etc. the names and rulers quickly pile up and never seem to create a sense of cohesion or definite states. Given how complex the actual political landscape was, this confusion probably reflects the reality.

Mentioned frequently throughout the book is the perspective of German historians seeing the Teutonic Knights as noble warriors of Christ, and Polish and Lithuanian's seeing them as bloodthirsty, rapacious bandits. Given Prussia then Germany's proclivities towards aggression up to WW2, the Knights have been viewed as a cultural fingerprint of German life, an early aspect of its imperial expansion and brutal subjugation. Specific perspectives like that emphasize just how centuries of political and cultural conflict shape the way we view the past.

Peter C Lyon says

Huge Kudos to Urban for tremendous research and bringing this subject to life in the English language. The history of the Teutonic Knights is fascinating, from the Crusades, to the Conquest of Prussia and large parts of the Baltics, wars with medieval pagans deep in Lithuanian forests, and even their decline at the hands of Poles, Ivan the Terrible -- and even the teachings of Martin Luther.

However, it seems that better edits would have improved the book markedly. Chapter upon chapter appear to suggest that the reader is an expert in medieval history and/or knows German fluently. Large parts of the

book appear to be serialized articles, rather than a continuous narrative. Urban should take a step back at times to explain the larger picture -- e.g the Hussite Wars, political dynamics of the Holy Roman Empire, etc. Timelines and chapter summaries would help as well. Conversely, one can also say that Urban could really go into the weeds and write separate volumes on the rise, flourishing, and decline of the Order.

Still, a fun read. Chalk full of maps, etc, and brutal medieval sieges, as well as descriptions of "Crusaders" from the rest of Europe.

Stephen says

This was surprisingly the only book that I could find on the topic after a cursory search - with that said it covers the material rather exhaustively, if sometimes with a touch more romance than is appropriate for what is an otherwise scholarly work. This book sheds a lot of light on the origin and development of regional tensions between Germany, the Baltic states, the Polish/Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the various entities of the emerging Russian states during the medieval period. I'd recommend it for anyone already interested in the subject matter, but I'd guess it probably won't hold a lot of broader appeal outside that subset of readers.

William Shep says

Urban, an expert in Baltic and east european history, has given us a comprehensive account of the rise and fall of a great military order. Most importantly, he has convincingly demonstrated that the Teutonic Knights, or more accurately the German Order, was a Roman Catholic organization, like many others, dedicated to helping the sick and advancing Christianity via the crusade and not some kind of twisted forerunner of Nazi Germany. He takes generations of historians and political leaders to task for creating and perpetuating this myth which does not honestly study the order's history but rather foments ethnic hatreds between Germans, Poles, Lithuanians, and Russians.

Ray says

This book is an exploration of a fascinating perod of history, whereby mainly German crusaders brought christianity to the eastern fringes of Europe. The impact of these events have echoed down the centuries and strands of the teutonic knights story are still relevant today (and were even more so prior to the forced resettlements after WW2)

I liked this book, though I must say that the style is less fluent that I would have wished. Sometimes it just seemed to be a recitation of dates, people and events without really bringing much life or interest to the reader.

Not the most readable history book I have read.

Eric Pecile says

A chronologically expansive narrative history of the Teutonic Order; a great introduction to the subject. Stylistically it is a bit dry making certain parts rather dull but offers enough insight to really get one thinking on the complex structure and culture of monastic military organizations.

Craig says

A good workmanlike study of the most fascinating military organization this side of the French Foreign Legion or perhaps the United States Marine Corps.

Martin Mulcahey says

Great in terms of information and conclusions drawn from writers unquestionable expertise. Did find myself bogged down a bit in cast of characters, but to be expected in book that covers such large space of time. However, none of the figures stood out since writing was a bit monotone and academic IMO. Would get a current map of Europe to get a better feel of where tribes and nation principalities described were located to get a better feel for topographical forces at work. Overall, good book and worth the read but not gripingly rendered.

Ola says

'tis not an objective historical account Urban
