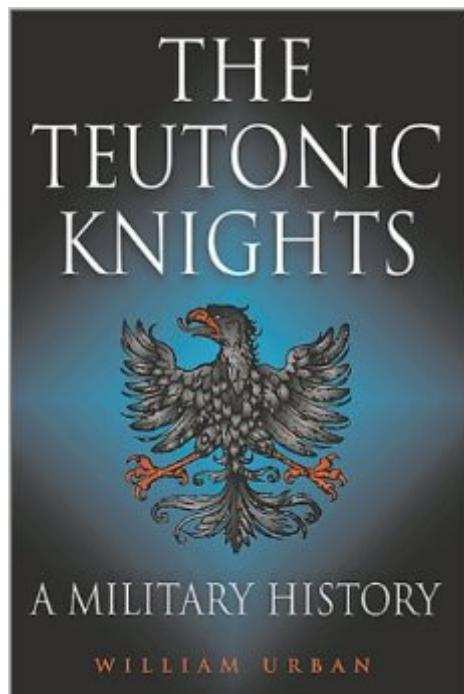


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The Teutonic Knights: A Military History



Synopsis

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 year-after-year struggle to maintain power, fend off incursions and raiding bands, and launch crusades against unbelieving foes. A major new history of this military order that defines the lives, deeds and actions of medieval German crusaders; covers 500 years of European history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As a Latvian, the German Knights figured prominently in the history of the Latvian tribes. But, until I read this book, I had no clear understanding of the "German Knights" or the "Baltic Crusades." Since this book is a military history of the Teutonic Knights, the author poses this in the Introduction. "Why a book on the military history of the Teutonic Knights? Why not earlier?...One answer is the best historians of the crusades have traditionally concentrated their attentions on the Holy Land; most medieval historians in recent decades have lacked much interest in military affairs; and amateur historians in the English-speaking world are not prepared to handle the many languages involved in studying Baltic and East Central European history....Another good answer, perhaps more fundamental, is that the English-speaking public was generally unaware that there had been crusades in the Baltic, and, moreover, for many years also lost interest in the medieval efforts to

recover Jerusalem. No demand, hence no response by authors and publishers." page xii knew very little of the Teutonic Knights and the Swordbrothers. I knew, from my Latvian history Saturday school studies, that my ancestor Lett tribes/clans were Christianized by the sword. Because the Letts fought amongst themselves and did not seek unity, that is why they were absorbed in contrast to their fellow Balts, the Lithuanians. Before I read this book, I never really realized that the Pope had blessed a crusade against the heathen Balts. So, what happens with all of this activity? I was always under the impression that only German knights took part. That was not the case. Knights from Ireland, Scotland, England, Denmark and other places participated in converting the heathen. Why did military campaigns take place in winter?

I have very conflicted feelings towards this book. Mr. Urban does a good job of trying to depoliticize the history of the Teutonic Knights, a tough job indeed. He has favorite figures on both sides of the struggle, and you never get the feeling that he's manipulating the past. Overall, the book gives an impression of being an unbiased report. The scholarship behind the work seems solid. The author does a good job of conveying his passion for the subject to the reader. Those strengths are offset by significant weaknesses. The most significant weakness in this book is its organization. The chapters are organized by topic (One chapter dedicated to the conquest of Prussia, one to the conquest of Livonia, a few to the struggle with Lithuania, etc.) This makes the book very difficult for a newcomer to follow, as the topics are interrelated and aren't easily divided. Urban is constantly referring to people who he doesn't fully introduce into later chapters. One chapter will end in 1310, the next begins in 1210. This problem is compounded by the fact that he doesn't even maintain chronological order within his topics. It's difficult for a reader who is new to the topic to grasp the big picture, because you don't know what is going on in the other areas of the TK's realm. This poor organization also enhances the other major problem with this book: Urban's tendency to name drop. Although this book is divided into territorial topics, the actual TK leadership seemed to be more fluid. Someone who was in Prussia at time A was likely to be in Livonia at time B. Urban will introduce a figure at time A (which is at page 50), and then name drop him at time B (which is at page 130). In between those times, Urban has covered 100 years of history in one area and introduced 35 more figures.

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