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*Warping the Black Cross:
The Ideological Portrayal of the Teutonic Knights from 1190 until Today*

ABSTRACT: *This essay examines the historiography of the Teutonic Knights (established 1190) with a particular emphasis on their “association” with the SS (i.e., the Nazi “Schutzstaffel”). It uses medieval depictions, such as the “Livonian Rhymed Chronicle,” the writings of Enlightenment historian Gottfried Herder and modern historian William Urban, as well as popular fictional portrayals, such as the 1938 Soviet film “Alexander Nevsky” by Sergei Eisenstein. The author argues that the Teutonic Knights have frequently been interpreted on ideological grounds, especially in the twentieth century.*

KEYWORDS: *European history; Germany; Teutonic Knights; Livonian Rhymed Chronicle; Gottfried Herder; William Urban; SS; Sergei Eisenstein; ideology; historiography*

Introduction

Adorned with swastikas, burning cities along the way, the barbaric Germans are coming to commit atrocities against the common folk of Russia, and they can only be stopped by a charismatic leader, a peasant-loving “man of the people.” While this description may evoke an image of the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin heroically confronting the forces of Nazi Germany during their invasion of the Soviet Union via Poland, we are, in fact, dealing with the plot of a cinematic classic. The 1938 film *Alexander Nevsky*, a Soviet propaganda piece directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), draws explicit parallels between the Nazi pursuit of eastward expansion and the 1242 attempt by the Livonian Order – a branch of the Teutonic Knights – to invade Novgorod, a medieval republic stretching from the Gulf of Finland to north central Russia.¹ But how can such a cinematic interpretation of the Teutonic Knights be significant for the study of history? Is it possible that historians, misled by presentism, have made undue comparisons between the members of this Christian community and the neo-pagan soldiers of Adolf Hitler’s Schutzstaffel (SS), Nazism’s elite protective guard?² Indeed, the conflation of the Teutonic Knights with Nazism, particularly the SS, has not been restricted to Stalinist propaganda films. There has been an urge in the historiography of the Teutonic Knights to write this misinterpretation into their history. What is more, the Teutonic Knights’ demonization began long before Stalin and has survived after the crumbling of the so-called “Iron Curtain,” the line that once divided Europe between countries under Western influence and countries dominated by the Soviet Union. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Enlightenment critiques of the Teutonic Knights became associated with anti-Germanic

¹ *Alexander Nevsky*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1938; West Long Branch: Corinth Video, 1990). The “Black Cross” in this essay’s title refers to the Teutonic Knights’ religious symbol.

² Scholars continue to debate how much Christianity and “neo-paganism” played a role in Nazism generally and the SS especially. See Eric Kurlander, *Hitler’s Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

nationalist history writing, and, in the twentieth century, the Teutonic Knights' image was warped further by Marxist Eastern European scholars who identified them with Nazism. In this essay, I argue that the Teutonic Order has been subjected to ideologically motivated historiographical distortion from the Enlightenment until today; I explore how and why this happened; and I acknowledge the recent pushback against these ideas and the current trend toward analyzing the Teutonic Order within its proper historical context.

This essay builds on the idea that the “medieval mentality,” as historian of the Middle Ages Kurt Villads Jensen puts it, was fundamentally different.³ Rather than seeing the Teutonic Knights' agency as a thinly veiled socio-economic or ethno-nationalist conquest, theirs was a penitential war, and they were primarily concerned with their relationship with God—both their own and their enemies'. Following an assessment of the Teutonic Order's medieval self-portrayal and its Enlightenment critiques, I trace its historiographical journey through the era of Romantic nationalism and then into, during, and beyond the paired dictatorships of Stalinism and Nazism. The Nazis themselves were complicit in the Teutonic Order's historiographical portrayal as a precursor and parallel to Nazism. Thus, to take at face value the Nazis' notion of themselves as heirs of the Teutonic Order is to happily digest their propaganda.

I. The Teutonic Order and Its Association with the “Ancien Régime”

The Teutonic Order's early history itself is replete with biases and historical tinkering, as can be observed in the chronicles of the Middle Ages. A good example of this is the *Livonian Rhymed Chronicle*, an anonymous work written in Middle High German in the 1290s: utilizing a Christian religious framework, it covers the German conquest of Livonia—a region on the Baltic Sea's eastern shores—in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Most likely written by a militarily experienced member of the Teutonic Order for his own community, the *Livonian Rhymed Chronicle* is unflinchingly biased toward the Teutonic Knights, but its author also criticizes, at times, members of the clergy, and he routinely depicts the brutal realities of warfare.⁴ One would, of course, expect a medieval chronicler who is detailing the supposed history of his own community to paint said community in a positive light. Yet, the *Livonian Rhymed Chronicle*, regardless of its “insider” bias, remains a historical work that is not (yet) filtered through a presentist ideological framework.

Well over a century before the Enlightenment, the Teutonic Order—an institution with historic ties to the Crusades and still considerable territorial influence—was targeted in an anti-Catholic (and thus rather presentist) fashion by Martin Luther (1483–1546), the influential German theologian and leader of the

³ Kurt Villads Jensen, introduction to *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150–1500*, ed. Alan V. Murray (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2001), xxi.

⁴ *The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle*, trans. Jerry C. Smith and William L. Urban (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1977), xxi–xxii.

Protestant Reformation.⁵ However, it was not until the Enlightenment itself that the Teutonic Order was confronted by the full disdain directed against any and all institutions associated with the so-called “ancien régime.” Initially, the term “ancien régime” had been used to denote the French absolutist state from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century as a “rubbish heap of chaos, illogicality, routine, waste, and injustice,”⁶ but the “Enlightened” soon launched similar critiques against all “ancient” European “feudal” systems born in the Middle Ages. Thus, the Age of Enlightenment marked the true beginning of the Teutonic Order’s demonization, and the Enlightenment thinkers’ blanket critiques of medieval ideas and systems became strongly associated with the institution. However, as historian Michael Burleigh points out, the Teutonic Order was subjected to critiques of a unique nature. Regarding the German “philosophic historian” Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Burleigh writes that

his [i.e., Herder’s] lack of sympathy for the Crusades and military religious orders stemmed from both an intense detestation of anything that conquered and crushed other communities and an almost childlike impressionability and sensitivity to peoples very different from those of his own time.⁷

Thus, while critiques of the Teutonic Order can generally be correlated with Enlightenment invectives against the Middle Ages, there was already something deeper at play. According to Herder, the Germans were those “by whom” the “peaceful people” of the Baltic region had been “oppressed and subdued,”⁸ and the Germans—as a people—were, of course, fundamentally tied to the Teutonic Order. Herder wrote that “humanity shudders at the blood spilled by” their (i.e., the Teutonic Knights’) “barbarities,” which “nearly extirpated” the native Prussians (i.e., the Indigenous inhabitants of Prussia, a German medieval region that eventually became important to the nineteenth-century German nation state) and left the native “Lettonians reduced to a state of slavery.”⁹ Yet, Herder did have some admiration for Christianity, which had fostered a “genuine bond of friendship and brotherly love,”¹⁰ as well as for the Germans, who had been “the foundation of the civilization, freedom and security of Europe.”¹¹ Herder’s multifaceted critical appraisal represents a unique strand of the Enlightenment

⁵ See Sven Ekdahl, “Crusades and Colonisation in the Baltic: A Historiographic Analysis,” in *The North-Eastern Frontiers of Medieval Europe: The Expansion of Latin Christendom in the Baltic Lands*, ed. Alan V. Murray (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 12.

⁶ William Doyle, *The Ancien Régime*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave/St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 31.

⁷ Michael Burleigh, “The Knights, Nationalists and the Historians: Images of Medieval Prussia from the Enlightenment to 1945,” *European History Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1987): 37–38.

⁸ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, trans. T. O. Churchill (1784; New York: Bergman Publishers, 1966), 476–477.

⁹ Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy*, 476–477.

¹⁰ Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy*, 495.

¹¹ Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy*, 482.

critiques of Germans in general and the military religious orders in particular, one that shares many commonalities with later ideas.

II. "National Awakenings" and the Reappraisal of the Teutonic Order

During the nineteenth century's "national awakenings," nations rose from their slumber and began to justify their existence by molding history. Thus, the Teutonic Order found itself further fictionalized in accordance with the aims of Romantic nationalists. There were two opposites, though: on the one hand, there was Germany; on the other hand, there were the "Slavic" states, Germany's eastern neighbors, including Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Russia. Both sides formulated their ideas in response to Enlightenment concepts, yet both sides also eventually devolved into equally irrational and ideological schools of thought. With regard to those who were sympathetic to the Teutonic Order, German historian Johannes Voigt (1786–1863) is a good starting point. Placing the Teutonic Knights in context, Voigt advanced Herder's earlier arguments toward a more favorable conclusion, arguing that—although their deeds committed against the natives had been wrong—the Teutonic Knights had done quite a lot of good for civilization as well.¹² Thus, the idea of the civilization-bearing German (via the Teutonic Order) was planted into the modern mind, also referred to as the "culture-carrier theory." The German historian and nationalist Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–1896) subsequently took up this idea and cleansed it of its Enlightenment remnants. According to historian Sven Ekdahl, Treitschke "let no obstacle prevent him from stressing Germanic superiority over the Slavic race and the marvels of German-ness and the great Prussian past."¹³

The Teutonic Order's reappraisal occurred in the context of German nation-building. Yet, there were regions and peoples that had once been under the Teutonic Order's dominion, including Poland and Lithuania, that were intentionally excluded from nation-building and history-writing by virtue of being under the dominion of either Germany or Russia. The historical novel *The Knights of the Cross* by Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916) illustrates a turn-of-the-century Polish—and generally Eastern European—Romantic nationalist interpretation of the Teutonic Order. It was the clear purpose of Sienkiewicz's work to stir up the Polish nationalist spirit by countering the Teutonic Order's traditional narrative with the Romantic narrative of the Polish people. To do so, the idea of the Polish nation was explicitly projected back into the historic conflict between the Polish (and Lithuanian) people and the Teutonic Knights, particularly the latter's crushing defeat at the 1410 Battle of Grunwald. Assessing this momentous event, Sienkiewicz exclaimed that, "not only was the perfidious Order of the Knights lying there, stretched at the feet of the [Polish] king, but all the German might, which up to that battle had been flooding unfortunate Slav lands like a sea, had

¹² For Johannes Voigt, see Burleigh, "Knights, Nationalists and the Historians," 39.

¹³ Ekdahl, "Crusades and Colonisation," 13.

broken itself against Polish breasts on that great day, that day of purification and redemption.”¹⁴ Thus, Sienkiewicz fundamentally linked the Teutonic Order to the German nation as it stood opposed to the Polish kingdom and the other Slavic realms with their modern dreams of statehood. *The Knights of the Cross* was deeply rooted in the late-nineteenth-century context of German unification and expansion, which were themselves tied to the “culture-carrier theory.” Sienkiewicz’s novel received rave reviews outside of Poland, a clear sign that its message was resonating with many.¹⁵

III. Ideological Manipulation and Its Consequences

In the 1930s, the interpretation of the Teutonic Order’s history was warped into something far more sinister. As had been the case before, the distortion was polarized, and it took place on a battleground that saw the ideological forces of Nazism and Communism facing off against each other. Indeed, things took such a dark turn that modern historiography is still recovering from the fallout. To the Nazis, and to Hitler himself, the German military had to emulate the Teutonic Order’s practices in order to succeed in bringing German culture and influence into the East. In this ideology, the Teutonic Order’s original ideals disappeared, it was reduced to a propagandistic symbol (including its Black Cross), and it was instrumentalized as a Romantic appeal to the German national past. Shortly after they had banned whatever was left of the Teutonic Order in Austria and Czechoslovakia, in 1938 and 1939 respectively, the Nazis recovered its banners for ideological purposes, and Nazi historians played their part in the Teutonic Order’s symbolic glorification as well.

As for the Soviets, they distorted their initially more neutral historical approach into an ideological tool against Nazi propaganda. While he had still panned the Teutonic Order’s ideological dramatization in the 1920s, Soviet historian M. N. Pokrovskii (1868–1932) soon saw to it that the Teutonic Order became the ultimate villain in both Soviet historiography and popular imagination.¹⁶ Sergei Eisenstein’s 1938 film *Alexander Nevsky* is a prime example for the Teutonic Order’s weaponization to fit ideological aims. The film is drenched with symbolism that draws parallels between the Teutonic Knights and Nazism on the one hand and their medieval and modern opponents – Alexander Nevsky (1221–1263) and Joseph Stalin – on the other hand. The symbols range from explicit to more subtle. A swastika adorns the clothing of the bishop, who crosses himself and the knights with his hand raised, as if imitating a Nazi salute. Also “on the nose” is the hand in a perfect Nazi salute that sits atop the helmet of one of the higher-ranking knights. Then there are more implicit parallels, such as

¹⁴ Henryk Sienkiewicz, *The Knights of the Cross*, trans. Jeremiah Curtin (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1900; originally published 1899), 343–344.

¹⁵ Sienkiewicz, *Knights of the Cross*, 347.

¹⁶ See Ekdahl, “Crusades and Colonisation,” 14–18.

the depiction of the knights as robotic killers who commit barbaric acts without flinching; juxtaposed with this is Nevsky, a steadfast man of the collective Russian people and a strong leader – like Stalin.¹⁷ Film scholar David Bordwell explains Eisenstein’s groundbreaking use of contrast: Nevsky and his forces appear in dark hues, representing the soil of Russia, while the Teutonic Knights are depicted white as icy death, reflecting their eventual defeat on the frozen lake.¹⁸ Initially released before the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939), a non-aggression agreement between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, Stalin pulled the film when it seemed that he and Hitler were on good terms. In 1941, after Nazi Germany had invaded the Soviet Union, Stalin ordered the film immediately re-released.

The legacy of the Teutonic Order’s polarized ideological interpretation has rippled throughout the historiography ever since, mostly in national and anti-German strands. In Lithuania, according to Ekdahl, “the evaluation of the [Teutonic] Order is [still] mostly negative,” and the “image of the knight-brothers in fairy tales and children’s books is also dark,” even though scholarly assessments of the Teutonic Order have become more nuanced and less Marxist. There has been resistance of varying degrees against ideological distortion in many places in Central and Eastern Europe, including Germany, Latvia, Estonia, and Russia.¹⁹ Yet, the scholarly battle about the Teutonic Order’s history rages on, and remnants of previous political manipulations can still be felt.

Fortunately, this is not the end of the story, and, fittingly, serious academic pushback has been discernible from within the Teutonic Order’s own modern historiography. Written in 1987, Michael Burleigh’s article “The Knights, Nationalists and the Historians” traces the Teutonic Order’s historiography from the Enlightenment to 1945. Burleigh ends with an analysis of the twisting of the Teutonic Order’s mission and legacy by the Nazis, particularly by Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer of the SS.²⁰ Meanwhile, Sven Ekdahl’s 2014 chapter “Crusades and Colonisation in the Baltic” goes beyond 1945, tracing the historiography of the Teutonic Knights well into the early twenty-first century. Ekdahl assesses how the ideological warping of the Teutonic Order has left its mark on the historiography, and he shows that there has been a recent – ironically somewhat controversial – trend toward analyzing the Teutonic Order on its own merits in order to divorce it from distortion and misinterpretation. Concluding on a hopeful note, Ekdahl writes that “in years to come the discussion over Crusades and colonisation in the Baltic will certainly be greatly invigorated. In short, future historiography promises to be extremely interesting and informative.”²¹

¹⁷ *Alexander Nevsky*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein.

¹⁸ David Bordwell, commentary, on *Alexander Nevsky*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1938; West Long Branch: Corinth Video, 1990).

¹⁹ Ekdahl, “Crusades and Colonisation,” 25–29.

²⁰ Burleigh, “The Knights, Nationalists and the Historians,” 48–50.

²¹ Ekdahl, “Crusades and Colonisation,” 29.

Two centuries after the Enlightenment's politically motivated ideological warping, the Teutonic Order's historiography has finally entered a place of clarity from which to produce objective analysis. A premier example of this is historian William Urban's 2011 monograph *The Teutonic Knights: A Military History*. Instead of opening with a long historiographical discussion concerning the dangers and problems of writing the history of the Teutonic Knights, Urban briefly summarizes the issue in a three-page introduction. He writes that "there is much history to be learned here, or perhaps re-learned: the Teutonic Knights were once powerful and respected in Central Europe, but their reputation has suffered in recent times at the hands of propagandists, nationalists, Protestants, and secularists [...] these perceptions are now being rethought." As for his own intentions for writing the monograph, Urban posits that "for understanding the military history of the Teutonic Order, it is best for us to drop the Hollywood stereotypes [...] the true stories about the Teutonic Knights are sufficiently interesting that we do not have to distort them."²² In light of the past few centuries' twists and turns, there is something almost incomprehensible here, namely, a complete and utter rejection of the idea that the Teutonic Order should be studied on anything but its own terms and merits. I am of a mind to agree with Sven Ekdahl that the future looks promising.

As for my own interpretation, I offer a single comparison, namely, the contrast between the oaths sworn, respectively, by new members of the Teutonic Order and by new members of the SS. The juxtaposition is striking, especially when considering the concept of the fundamentally different "medieval mentality."²³ New members of the Teutonic Order swore as follows:

I promise the chastity of my body, and poverty, and obedience to God, Holy Mary, and you, to the master of the Teutonic Order, and your successors, according to the rules and practices of the Order, obedience unto death.²⁴

New members of the SS swore as follows:

I swear to you, Adolf Hitler, as Führer and Reich Chancellor, loyalty, and bravery; I vow to you, and to those you have named to command me, obedience unto death, so help me God.²⁵

Note that the new SS member's oath is the complete structural inverse of the new Teutonic Knight's oath. In the Teutonic Order's oath and its promises, God comes first, Holy Mary second, and the master of the Order and his successors last. In the SS's oath, Hitler comes first, adorned with both state and party titles, while God is tacked on as a mere afterthought. The new SS member promises nothing to God;

²² William L. Urban, *The Teutonic Knights: A Military History* (Barnsley: Frontline, 2011), xii.

²³ Jensen, introduction to *Crusade and Conversion*, ed. Murray, xxi.

²⁴ Urban, *Teutonic Knights*, quote located on the back cover of the 2011 Frontline paperback edition.

²⁵ *Waffen-SS, The SS Calls You*, quoted in *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945–1 October 1946*, vol. 4, *Proceedings 17 December 1945–8 January 1946* (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal, 1947), 183.

he just shallowly and thoughtlessly invokes Him. There is a deeper meaning beyond the structure as well. The new member of the Teutonic Order promises to act virtuously: to keep his body chaste, to remain in poverty, and to render obedience. What “virtues” does the new SS member swear—not promise—to Adolf Hitler? Only loyalty, bravery, and obedience. The new SS member does not promise to uphold any particular rules or practices, for Nazism violates any and all standards of those. All he swears to uphold are the commands of Hitler and those appointed under him. The lone similarity between the newly initiated Teutonic Knight’s oath and the new SS member’s oath is a religiously oriented pledge of “obedience unto death.” This is a microcosm of the problem: SS sucked the Christian religious life out of the Teutonic Order, inhabited its corpse, and flipped it upside down, filling it instead with neo-pagan religious devotion to a man and the racialized nation under him.

Conclusion

The Teutonic Order’s historiography is indeed a complicated and troubled subject. The story of the Teutonic Knights is complex enough; needing to parse through a range of different and frequently distorted interpretations only adds to the scholar’s burden. Needless to say, the Teutonic Order is not the only historical phenomenon whose mission and legacy has been subjected to politically motivated critiques and ideological distortions. Yet, though strongly related to the changes in thinking associated with philosophical and political movements like the Enlightenment and nationalism, the Teutonic Order seems to be in an interpretive class all of its own. The slow progression of critical ideas eventually culminated in the Teutonic Order’s demonization before, during, and after World War II—a legacy that is still alive in the historiography today. Fortunately, recent scholarship has exhibited a tendency toward analyzing the Order without employing the use of presentism. Though there is still much work to be done, this is a promising development.

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