

The Teutonic Knights

By Paul A. Schons



One of the medieval orders of knights within the Christian Church was a specifically German order of holy knights (holy in the sense of being an organization of the Christian Church within the Holy Roman Empire and having a religious mission). In English they are called the Teutonic Knights; In German they are the "DEUSCHER ORDEN" or more fully, the "HAUS DER RITTER DES HOSPITALS SANKT MARIEN DER DEUSCHEN ZU JERUSALEM". They are interesting because of their significant role in the history of Germany and also because the order continues to be active, albeit in a form starkly

modified from their role in medieval history.

Like the better known Knights of Malta, the German knights were originally founded to be more or less of a medic corps to treat the sick and wounded crusaders in the Third Crusade and to minister to their spiritual needs. This was in 1191 in Palestine (in contemporary Israel). To this purpose the order was approved by Pope Clement III. In 1198 the German hospitalers (Hospitalorden) were changed in character. The need for combatants in the Holy Land led to the lay members being armed, given the designation Knights (Ritter), and given a military role in addition to their medical and religious ministry. Thus the German order moved into a role similar to the Knights Templar, both monastic and military. In this role Popes Clestine III and Innocent III granted them sizable fiefs of land in Jerusalem and in Germany. Their uniform in their mission of combat came to be the white tunic with a black cross. By

1291 when Palestine returned to Islamic control, the German Knights had retreated to their lands in Germany. There they took on the function of protecting the boundaries of Christendom in the East of Europe from pagan incursions and actively engaging in crusades into the lands of the pagans for the purpose of Christianization.

The most significant of their encounters with pagans was that with the Prussians who lived in the lands east of Poland. The Knights, in effect, contracted for the conquest of the Baltic pagans in return for the rights to the lands they would conquer. Their assistance was requested by the Duke of Poland, Conrad, and approved by the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Friedrich II and the Pope, Gregory IX. As a result of the following 50 years of aggression Prussia was established as a Christian theocracy governed by the lay members of the Teutonic Knights and colonized by a predominately German ethnic population. By the end of the 14th century the Teutonic Knights controlled Prussia, a good part of the lands which are now Estonia, Latvia and

Lithuania and parts of Pomerania.

During the following centuries the order weakened and progressively lost territory. The (temporary) end of the order came in 1809 when Napoleon, nearing the zenith of his power, declared the order dissolved and redistributed its remaining territorial holdings. The order, however, clandestinely persevered and managed to hold a few small tracts of land in the Tyrolian Alps. In 1834 the Emperor of Austria officially reinstated the order in Vienna but the military character was explicitly removed. The order was now defined as a purely religious order with a charitable and ministerial mission. It was at this time that the order was expanded to include women as the sisters of the German order. In 1871 Pope Pius IX approved new rules for the priests of the order. Since that time the office of Grand Master has been held only by priests. Subsequent alterations to the rules of the order increased the emphasis on religious discipline. Today the order still includes associated lay persons and holds the designation of order of knights

(Ritterorden) but the knighthood involved is understood in a purely ceremonial sense.

The order was officially dissolved once again in 1938 by Nazi authorities. It was revived once again after the war in 1947 in the Republic of Austria. The headquarters of the order today is in Vienna. There are also active branches in Bavaria, Hesse and in Northern Italy (South Tyrol). The order had been active in the Eastern territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but when those areas became parts of the communist block after World War II, the order was banned there. Since the end of the Cold War the order has become active again in Slovenia, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. Today there are 90 priests and brothers in the order, 280 sisters and 680 lay associates. (10 of the associates currently live in the United States.) The lay associates live outside the monastic life of the order and assist in the mission of the order "to help, to defend and to heal the sick" (Helfen - Wehren - Heilen). The order continues to operate hospitals, homes for the elderly and ambulance services in keeping

with the goals of its earliest establishment.

The order also continues to exist in Holland in a form which in many respects is the polar opposite to the order headquartered in Vienna. The Dutch, Ridderlijke Duitse Orde, Balije von Utrecht, is Protestant and bars any German members. The Teutonic Knights at the time of Luther became simultaneously Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist in their own rather unique pattern of dealing with the vicissitudes of the Reformation period. The Dutch branch became completely Protestant by 1580 and declared independence from the authority of the main order. After the Napoleonic prohibition of both branches of the order, the branch headquartered in Utrecht was brought back into existence by the House of Orange in 1815 as a Protestant fraternity of nobles. The admission of German nationals was forbidden after 1938 and older remaining Germans were expelled in 1945.

The German order has a fairly extensive Web site on the Internet. Should you wish to visit the site, it is at:

<http://www.dtorden.or.at/index.htm>

The information is available in
German and English versions.

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