

# Study on the Secularization of the Teutonic Knights' State

Xiao Hongde<sup>1,\*</sup>, Trieu Thi My An<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Military orders are closely related to the Crusade Movement. Their main duties were to protect pilgrims, defend Christendom, and resist Muslims. The Teutonic Knights' State was a special theocracy established in Prussia by the Teutonic Order. After the Protestant thought of Martin Luther spread to Prussia, however, the local nobility and town elites quickly accepted it, and the associated drive for secularization in Prussia triggered a massive peasant uprising in which Prussian society openly rebelled against the Teutonic Knights. After meeting with Luther and converting to Lutheranism, the Teutonic Grand Master Albert carried out a reformation in Prussia and successfully transformed the Teutonic Knights' State into the secular Duchy of Prussia.

**Key words:** Teutonic Knights' State, Luther, Reformation, Secularization, Duchy of Prussia

## INTRODUCTION

As an independent military force, military orders played a pivotal role in the affairs of the Crusader states in not only a military but also a political and economic sense. The Knights Templar, the Knights Hospitaller, and the Teutonic Knights constituted the three standing military forces of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, with a total strength of 2,000–3,000 men. The Knights Templar and Hospitaller were formed and grew strong during the construction of the kingdom itself. The order of the Teutonic Knights was founded after the Third Crusade in Acre, with its main area of activity in the Baltic Sea region. After the fall of Acre (then the temporary capital of the Second Kingdom of Jerusalem) in 1291, the order moved its headquarters to Venice and devoted itself to the conquest of the Baltic. In the early 14th century, Grand Master Siegfried moved its headquarters again, this time to Marienburg, Prussia, calling for the Christianization and colonization of the areas that had since been conquered, and he established a new and unique theocracy: the Teutonic Knights' State, ruled by the order's elite soldiers.<sup>1</sup> From then on, the fate of Prussia would remain closely connected with the Teutonic Knights. In the 16th century, the Reformation initiated by Martin Luther severely affected the Roman Catholic Church, greatly weakening its secular power and that of the Pope. As a result, both the Pope and the Church were too heavily occupied with the crisis of the Reformation to consider the survival of the Crusader states. The monarchs of Western Europe, meanwhile, were engaged in strengthening nation-states and consolidating feudal autocratic rule, lacking the impetus

and will of the Crusade expeditions. The Lutheran concept of secularization strengthened the sense of identity of European nation-states, and the imperial power of those states continued to grow. By contrast, the secular power of the Catholic Church was becoming increasingly weak. Secular society in Europe gradually abandoned the ideas of the Crusade Movement, and the Teutonic Knights were no longer able to gain strong external support. After the doctrine of Lutheranism spread to Prussia, the region's traditional nobles and the upper class quickly adopted the ideal of secularization. Consequently, the divided Prussian society openly resisted the rule of the Teutonic Knights and instead recognized Poland as its suzerain. In 1520, the Teutonic Knights were dramatically defeated in battle against a Finnish–Lithuanian coalition force. In the face of domestic strife and foreign troubles, Grand Master Albert of Brandenburg converted to Lutheranism. He subsequently launched a reformation to secularize the Teutonic Knights' State and discarded the order's military function through religious and political reforms. The Teutonic Knights returned to being a single-attribute religious order, and its unique theocracy began to disintegrate as the former unity of its religious, military, and political power ceased. Shortly afterward, the Teutonic Knights' State was transformed into the secular Duchy of Prussia.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TEUTONIC KNIGHTS' STATE

In the Latin East and West, the military, political, and economic activities of military orders can be understood as a powerful force within the Crusade Movement. Military orders were closely related to the

<sup>1</sup>Research Fellow, College of Languages and Cultures, Chengdu University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

<sup>2</sup>Research Fellow, Department of Chinese Language, Thanh Dong University, Hai Duong Province, Vietnam

### Correspondence

**Xiao Hongde**, Research Fellow, College of Languages and Cultures, Chengdu University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

Email: dongjinghan92@gmail.com

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movement and were born in the periods of the First and Third Crusades. Taking its instructions directly from the Pope, a military order was not subject to the jurisdiction and intervention of the Latin Church or the ruler of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. In this respect, each order constituted something of a “state within a state” in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, enjoying absolute autonomy while influencing the policies and decisions of the kingdom and even participating in the competition for the heir of the royal family of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

During this early period, the passage from Palestine to the holy city of Jerusalem was unsafe and travelers were often harassed by “pagan” Muslims. Between 1119 and 1120, Hugh of Payns, a knight from Champagne, organized eight fellow soldiers into a team of lay monks to protect pilgrims traveling to and from Jerusalem. King Baldwin II of Jerusalem granted this new order part of the royal palace, sited upon the supposed Temple of Solomon, as its headquarters, hence its members’ becoming known as the Knights Templar.<sup>2</sup> Soon after this, papal envoys recognized the legal status of the Templars in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. The order prepared to fight for its faith, and its members went into battle as a lifelong way of expressing their piety.<sup>3</sup> The Templars were militarily aggressive from the order’s inception. In the Latin East, the actions of the Knights Templar were considered a potential form of crusading, which drove further Crusade expeditions and encouraged other religious orders to follow their example. This led to the creation of the Knights Hospitaller and the Teutonic Knights. Shortly after the First Crusade, the Order of St. John’s Hospital was born, initially committed to the cause of charity and care. Just decades after its founding, however, encouraged and inspired by the Knights Templar, the order followed the Templars and transformed itself into a military order, the Knights Hospitaller.<sup>4</sup> In 1187, after the disastrous Battle of Hattin, the sultan Saladin captured Jerusalem. The fall of the Holy Land caused great repercussions in Western society. At the call of the Pope and the Catholic Church, the English King Richard the Lionheart and the French King Philippe II led the Third Crusade in an effort to regain the Holy Land from Saladin. The Holy Roman Emperor Barbarossa subsequently led a German army to join the Third Crusade; unfortunately, he drowned, and his son, the Duke of Swabia, succeeded him. After arriving at the siege of Acre in 1190, those German Crusaders who continued to participate in the Third Crusade created a field hospital affiliated with the German Hospital of Santa Maria in Jerusalem. In 1198, the Santa Maria Hospital and the

field hospital were reorganized into the Teutonic Order, with almost all of its members German. The Teutonic Knights, like the Hospitallers, took on the dual roles of fighting and caring for patients, and the order’s rules were formulated more or less in line with those of the Knights Templar.<sup>5</sup>

The Baltic Crusade Movement led by the Teutonic Knights occupies an important place in European history, having Christianized the Baltic region and expanded the Catholic sphere of influence. As a result, local adherence to the Eastern Orthodox Church was minimal. From the perspective of the Crusaders, the colonial conquest by the Teutonic Knights in Prussia was successful.<sup>6</sup> After the fall of Acre in the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1291, the Teutonic Order moved its headquarters to Venice, midway between Palestine and the Baltic Sea. As early as 1226, its grand master, Hermann, officially received a frontier duchy in Prussia and obtained the title of Royal Prince of the Holy Roman Empire. Subsequently, the Teutonic Knights gained semi-autonomous status in their new territory. In 1234, Pope Gregory IX made the land a possession of Saint Peter, directly protected by the Roman diocese, and later bestowed it to the Teutonic Knights as a piece of papal possession.<sup>7</sup> After more than half a century of colonial conquest and associated bloodshed, by 1285, the Teutonic Knights had finally completed the conquest of the Baltic. In September 1309, Grand Master Siegfried moved the order’s headquarters to Marienburg, Prussia, and Prussian development and rule would thereafter remain closely connected with the Teutonic Knights.<sup>8</sup> The Crusade Movement retained enormous influence in Prussia and transformed the local tribal society, modernizing and civilizing it. The Teutonic Knights conquered Prussia by military might, spread Christian teachings, and gradually took secular control. They demanded Prussians be baptized, killing anyone who refused.<sup>9</sup> Taking the Holy War spirit of the Crusade as its religious ideology, the order established a new and unique type of theocracy, the Teutonic Knights’ State, ruled by the knightly elite. The knights ruled the state through administrative organs based in the administrative chamber of the order’s headquarters. The state retained the language of the German nation (such as it then was), a form of Eastern Middle German, similar to the standard German language after the unification of Germany.

In the early 15th century, there were around 700 Crusader knights in Prussia, and the order maintained the friar lifestyle and acted as a single military force. The Teutonic Knights’ State was a religious republic

among feudal monarchs in the West, with the highest authority belonging to the grand master and a commission of five high governors. The grand master was the greatest lord in the territory of the Teutonic Knights' State and the vassal of the Holy Roman Empire. The state territory was organized into 20 administrative regions under the command of the grand master and one "archdeacon" who governed with the help of a "counselor." The governors were all members of the order, prohibited from owning private property and sworn to abstinence.<sup>10</sup> Twelve were German "immigrants," and 12 German districts were governed by auxiliary commanders for their internal affairs. Due to war, many large landowners in Prussia had been wiped out and the land was almost laid waste. The Teutonic Knights' State encouraged immigration and established an economy that functioned effectively. After nearly a century of development, immigrants, who included Germans, Lithuanians, and Poles, had gradually lost their independent identities and merged into a unified state of "neo-Prussians." Nominally, the Prussian land of the Teutonic Knights' State was papal territory, but in reality, the Pope enjoyed only symbolic suzerainty. In order to attract further immigration from the German Empire and recruit more members from German territory, the Teutonic Knights' State established a series of free cities on its territory subject to the decrees of the Hanseatic League.

Having conquered Prussian society using violence, the Teutonic Knights then defined their own identity by the name of the conquered nation. This is a very strange phenomenon in world history: The conquering power took the name of the conquered nation to mark itself. However, the "old Prussians," that is, the conquered, and the "new Prussians," that is, the conquerors, were not fully integrated, and the gap between the two was widening. Residents of the territory felt that the Teutonic Order was a foreign ruler, and the Teutonic Knights deliberately kept a considerable distance from them: The result was to tear apart Prussian society, with the rulers and the people in opposing camps. The Teutonic Knights took in members from the German Empire and excluded the Prussian aristocracy. The native nobles and urban citizens of Prussia were unable to gain political power and status and began to unite Poland, free from the suzerainty of the Teutonic Knights' State. In spite of the violence with which the Teutonic Knights had taken power, the old Prussians united to wait for an opportunity to openly resist their rule. On July 15, 1410, the historic Battle of Grunwald took place. The Polish-Lithuanian coalition under the command of

King Vladislav II Jagiello fought a decisive engagement with the Teutonic Knights near Tannenberg and Grunwald. The elite among the knights were destroyed, including Grand Master Jungingen and most of the other leaders, leaving only around 350 knights remaining. The battle delivered a devastating blow to the order and saw the beginning of the decline of the Teutonic Knights' State.<sup>11</sup>

After the Battle of Grunwald, the Teutonic Knights' State descended into internal strife. Local peasants, dissatisfied with the conquest, rose in rebellion against the rule of the Teutonic Knights. The situation was clearly growing worse rather than better, and local nobles and free citizens seized the opportunity to gain political power by paying high taxes as a bargaining chip. The Teutonic Order no longer had the strength to carry out the necessary guard duties in the state, and the consequent sharp drop in tax revenues prevented them from paying the commission needed to recruit new members. In the 1530s, there were at most 65 knights in the order's headquarters of Marienburg, and military action was mostly conducted by relying on mercenaries. In the 1550s, the order found itself unable to pay the mercenaries, which led the latter to occupy or sell the military strategic castle.<sup>12</sup> In 1454, the traditional Prussian nobles and citizens of Marienburg established a Prussian Union against the rule of the Teutonic Knights.<sup>13</sup> The Prussian League concluded an alliance with the Kingdom of Poland, which intensified the conflict with the Teutonic Knights. After less than 13 years of war between the Teutonic Knights and the Kingdom of Poland, the two sides signed the Second Peace of Thorn in 1466.<sup>14</sup> This was a humiliating treaty for the Teutonic Knights, who conceded a great deal of territory, including Marienburg, marking the demise of the Baltic Crusade Movement. The Teutonic Order, facing trouble at home and abroad, approached a watershed in its existence. Meanwhile, Luther launched the Reformation in Germany, and his Protestant creed spread quickly across Europe, quickly reaching Prussia, where it would have a profound influence on the Teutonic Knights' State.

## TRANSMISSION AND INFLUENCE OF LUTHERAN DOCTRINE IN PRUSSIA

After the outbreak of the Reformation, Lutheranism gathered momentum from day to day, and its impact on Germany grew. Lutheran doctrine spread rapidly, and a significant number of Western European Catholics began to deviate from Catholicism, becoming Lutherans and abandoning the exclusively papal idea of Holy War. The Pope launched a political crusade to fight Protestantism, and most Catholics

came to see the threat posed by pagans as less serious than the “internal sin” presented by heretics or rebels.<sup>15</sup> The Teutonic Knights had been able to rapidly conquer Prussia and establish their unique theocracy mainly because of the reliable support provided by the Pope, the Catholic Church, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, and the secular aristocracy.<sup>16</sup> Donations and bequests from Western European society were the main sources of funds for the Teutonic Knights’ State: The Reformation severely weakened the Crusaders’ appeal, and the main financing stream of the Teutonic Knights’ State was cut off. The gradual decline of the Teutonic Knights’ State is closely related to its changing social context: It was formed in the Crusade Movement and maintained its survival and development on the basis of that association.<sup>17</sup> During the Reformation, Roman Catholicism was hit harder than the general populace. As the Teutonic Knights were closely associated with the Crusades, they were also drastically affected, with their strength, external support, and justification all weakened. Legitimate Protestants established the Protestant and state churches, which were strong enough to stand against the Roman Catholic Church, so they naturally opposed and rejected the Crusade Movement, which was led by the Pope and the Catholic Church.

Lutheran doctrine was spread to Prussia at a relatively early stage by German students at its universities and missionaries active in adjacent areas.<sup>18</sup> Luther himself rejected the Catholic idea that Christians should take up arms against Islamic forces and defend the Christian world and their own families. This denial of the idea of Holy War naturally led Lutheran believers to abandon the concept of papally-led Crusades. As a religious military organization existing to defend the achievements of the Crusade Movement, the legitimacy of the Teutonic Knights was bound to be questioned by secular society and lose support among European populations. In Prussia, too, the Catholic creed of the Teutonic Knights was impacted by the teachings of Lutheranism. Traditional nobles and urban elites quickly accepted and adopted the concept of Lutheran secularization, and the doctrine of Lutheranism also spread, though more slowly, in rural areas. This shift had a profound impact on Prussian society, which began to demand secularized reform of the Teutonic Knights’ State. This was a matter of life or death for the Teutonic Order, and Grand Master Albert complied with the demands of Prussian society. Albert accepted the Lutheran doctrine and strived to reform the Teutonic Knights’ State to secure its survival. Luther insisted that secular society

should have the right of autonomy and that the emperor did not have to be a Christian to perform his duties.<sup>19</sup> Luther believed that the emperor should be the secular ruler rather than the Pope or the head of another religion, or the savior helped by divine intervention in the universe, and he also denounced papal rule, which threatened the legitimate power of the emperor.<sup>20</sup> Luther’s idea of secularization was shared by Prussian society, and its increasing implementation accelerated the decline of the Teutonic Knights’ State. As a religious, political, and military unit, that state was bound to perish under the pressure of secularization if it did not conform to the historical trend of the development of Prussian society.

The concept of secularization in Lutheran doctrine served to constantly strengthen the nation-state consciousness in Western European society. Western European monarchs generally supported the Lutheran Reformation in order to more securely establish their nation-states. Taking Lutheran doctrine as their banner, they busied themselves consolidating their feudal autocratic rule, which left them with little time to care about the Crusade Movement. The knights of Europe participated enthusiastically in competitive wars among their countries and colonial expansion overseas, which prevented the Teutonic Knights from recruiting sufficient members. Within the Teutonic Knights’ State, secularization replaced Crusader consciousness, and the ruling class of the state was gradually secularized. The decline of the Crusades and the spirit of Holy War, alongside the unstoppable trend of secularization, caused a serious crisis in the Teutonic Knights’ State. The economy contracted: Production decreased, supplies proved insufficient, and knights even sold their horses to earn a living. At the beginning of its conquest of Prussia, the Teutonic Order had strong financial support, owning property in Germany, eastern France, and Italy, and even in the Holy Land and Greece.<sup>21</sup> In 1260, during a rebellion by the native Prussians, Pope Urban IV urged those who had sworn the cross to support the Teutonic Knights, and a large number of German Crusaders were still willing to wage Holy War. Similarly, in the Prussian rebellion of 1242, the Teutonic Knights obtained aid from the Crusaders led by Rudolf of Habsburg and Otto of Brandenburg.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the 14th century, Crusaders from across Europe joined the Teutonic Knights in the colonial conquest of the Baltic Sea region, including the Bohemians in 1323, the English in 1329, and the Austrians and French in 1336.<sup>23</sup> Due to the influence of the Lutheran Reformation on attitudes toward Crusading, the external support and aid the Teutonic Order had rallied through the concept of

Holy War gradually dwindled, leaving the group isolated.

The Teutonic Knights' State was always an isolated theocracy, with the order only absorbing members from the German Empire. The Teutonic Knights deliberately maintained a distance from the old Prussians, making it impossible to gain the latter's sincere support. The Lutheran Reformation, meanwhile, raged in Germany, affecting the order's capacity to gain support and recruit members from there. After the spread of Lutheranism to Prussia, the local nobles and upper classes swiftly adopted Lutheran doctrine, and the already divided Prussian society formed an alliance to openly resist the rule of the Teutonic Knights. In 1520, the Teutonic Knights again went to war with the Kingdom of Poland, and they were defeated. The powerful drive for secularization in Prussia subsequently triggered a massive peasant uprising, and Prussian society openly rebelled against the theocracy of the Teutonic Knights' State. Facing internal and diplomatic difficulties, Grand Master Albert converted to Lutheranism, carried out religious reform, and secularized the state before choosing to resign as grand master and end the theocracy. The Teutonic Knights became a purely religious order, their leader was transformed into a secular ruler, and the Teutonic Knights' State was successfully secularized to become the Duchy of Prussia.

### **TRANSFORMATION OF THE TEUTONIC KNIGHTS' STATE INTO THE SECULAR DUCHY OF PRUSSIA**

In 1511, at the age of 21, Albert was elected the 37th grand master of the Teutonic Knights. A member of the Hohenzollern family, he was the last grand master of the Teutonic Knights to hold a military role. In 1519–1521, inspired by the Reformation, the Teutonic Knights' State sought to reorganize its administrative power and break free from its obligation to serve as a Polish vassal. Albert refused to submit to Poland, and war broke out. Consequently, the Teutonic Knights were decisively defeated by the Polish army due to their lack of support from other Crusaders in Europe.<sup>24</sup> Demoralized and in trouble, Albert returned to Germany. At the time, Martin Luther was engaged in carrying out the Reformation, and Albert, attracted to Lutheran teachings, soon had the opportunity to meet Luther. In 1523 and 1524, the two men met twice, and Luther even published a special pamphlet on the Teutonic Knights to guide the reform of the state.<sup>25</sup> From that point onward, Albert increasingly

immersed himself in Lutheranism and actively supported the Lutheran Reformation, allowing Lutherans to preach in Königsberg in the Teutonic Knights' State. He also set about preparing for reformation in the Teutonic Knights' State, abandoning the Holy War as a military duty.<sup>26</sup> Accepting Luther's advice, he resigned as grand master of the Teutonic Knights and converted to Lutheranism. In line with the Lutheran concept of secularization, Albert then began the secularization of his own state. In 1525, he initiated a reformation in the Prussian region, declaring the Prussian territory on the right bank of the Vistula River a secularized duchy: The Duchy of Prussia was born. Albert's reforms were supported by the knightly class and the citizens of Prussia and even by the Polish king. In 1525, Albert was conferred to Poland and became hereditary Grand Duke of Prussia, eventually breaking relations with the Vatican. Albert's secularization reforms avoided the tragic outcome of the overall collapse of the Teutonic Knights' State.

Although Albert's reformation and the secularization of the Teutonic Knights' state were very successful in Prussia, conservative forces within the Teutonic Order and the Catholic nobles in Germany were deeply dissatisfied with Albert's conversion. They formed an alliance, planning to jointly oppose and expel Albert. In order to gain strong external support and deter his opposition, Albert married the daughter of Danish King Frederick I in 1527. The power of Frederick I proved a very effective deterrent for the opposition. The secularization of the Teutonic Knights' State in Prussia marked the formal end of the Teutonic Knights' organization as a military order, directly loyal to the Pope and the Crusade.<sup>27</sup> Lutheran secularization replaced the Holy War of the Crusades, and the end of the Teutonic Knights' State marked the end of the medieval world view.<sup>28</sup> The Teutonic Knights, a typical medieval mechanism dedicated to the Holy War in the Baltic Sea, collapsed.<sup>29</sup> The spread of Lutheranism in Prussia had epoch-making significance for religious change in Prussian society, as the Prussian region ruled by the Catholic Teutonic Knights was Protestantized by Albert. After the formation of the secular Duchy of Prussia, Albert became the first secular Grand Duke and submitted to the Kingdom of Poland. Having inherited the military tradition of the Teutonic Knights, the army of the Duchy of Prussia was known for its strict discipline and high military efficiency. Prussia is also synonymous with the modern German spirit of high administrative efficiency and integrity, as well as being identified as the source of German militarism. When Albert died, his son Albert Frederick succeeded him

as Grand Duke. Albert Frederick died childless, and John Sigismund of the Duchy of Brandenburg succeeded as the husband of Frederick's eldest daughter. Sigismund established the Duchy of Brandenburg-Prussia, which became part of the German Empire. In 1701, Frederick, the sixth Grand Duke of Prussia, established the Kingdom of Prussia and terminated the territory's vassal relationship with Poland. The Kingdom of Prussia, as a continuation of the Teutonic Knights' State, became an important political and military force in Europe, creating favorable conditions for the unification of Germany.

## CONCLUSION

After the formation of the Duchy of Prussia, the Teutonic Knights remained, now existing only as a religious order, no different from an ordinary religious organization. The order abandoned its military function and retained its charitable and ambulance functions. In 1809, during the French Revolution, Napoleon announced the dissolution of the Teutonic Knights after he invaded German territory. In 1834, the Austrian emperor rebuilt the Teutonic Knights, now to be a general charitable order. In 1929, the Teutonic Knights were renamed the German Order. Currently, the order is based in Vienna, Austria, and is engaged in charity, caring for the sick and the elderly.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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