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HENRY MONTE AND THE PRUSSIAN RISING OF 1260

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Little is known about the greatest hero of the Prussian rebellion of 1260, the man who led his people for twelve years against the Teutonic Knights and their crusader allies from Germany and Poland. Such contemporary information as is available derives exclusively from western sources which are expectedly and uniformly hostile to "the sons of Belial." These are sufficient to give us some insight into the mentality of the Prussian leadership of this era, but do not tell us much of Henry the mythic figure, the hero of the Prussian resistance — because that is a psychological phenomenon of more recent Lithuanian nationalism. The chronicles inform us only about the historical figure— Henry—who was the best known and most successful warrior to fight for Prussian freedom in its last days.

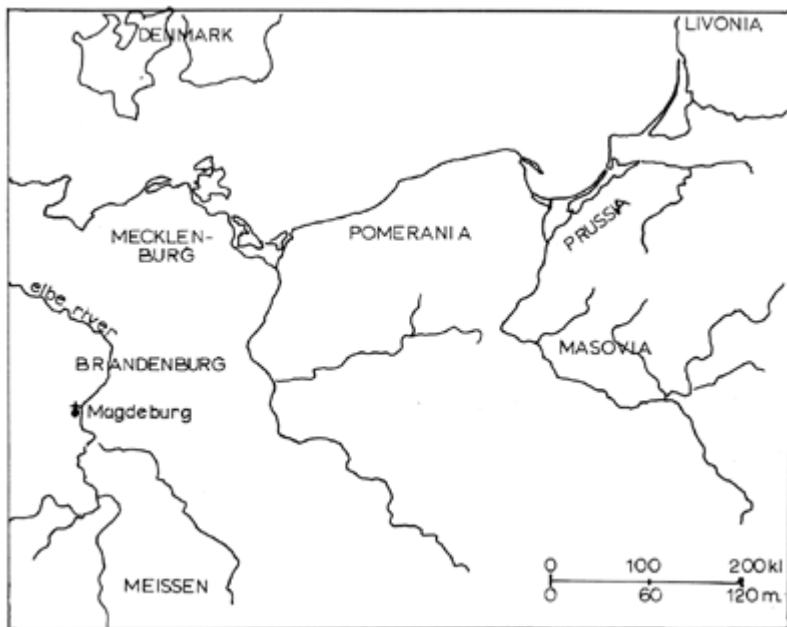
Henry Monte was born between 1225 and 1230, the son of a Nattangian noble. The Nattangians were one of the smaller Prussian tribes that lived on the southeastern coast of the Baltic, protected from the Poles to the south and the Lithuanians to the east by forest barriers and a formidable military reputation. The dozen Prussian tribes had no political unity, and therefore the Nattangians had little to do with the powerful Sambians and Bartians who were to the north and the east, or to the Warmians who were to the west of them. There was trade in weapons, cloth, and salt, and also people and horses, when border warfare was successful.

The Nattangians could raise 2000 horsemen in time of war and many thousand mounted infantry. The cavalry were naturally the nobles and their retainers. These lived in log and earth forts, supporting themselves by taxes, tribute, and presumably their own labor, but successful warfare was necessary to obtain a great reputation and wealth. Because the tribe was in a pre-feudal state, there was no single political leader; decisions were made by councils of important nobles who represented the clans. These meetings were marked by festivities and much drinking, and probably coincided with religious holidays.

The Prussian religion was not identical to Germanic or Scandinavian paganism, but it had much in common with them. The impact of Christian thought upon their concepts of the gods and the prospect of eternal life in heaven seems to have been important but this added to previous ideas rather than supplanting them. They maintained sacred groves where religious services were conducted by priests; and on the southern border, near Schippenbeil, was a spot sacred to all Prussians. There a high priest named Criwe conducted services and oversaw religious functions for all the tribes, particularly those ceremonies relating to the cremation of the dead and the placation of the spirits of the deceased.

The pagans held the dead in terror. It is not an accident that this is the birthplace of the werewolf legend and other superstitions. They burned the corpse with such weapons, clothing, and horses as he would need in the next world, because without these, the deceased would be without honor or status. The gods were similarly appeased by such offerings, but they had different needs—they required human sacrifices. Therefore, on raids the first prisoner taken was tied to a tree and shot with an arrow. If the blood ran freely, the raid could continue, because the gods predicted success; if it ran slowly, the raiders returned

home. The use of magic sticks to foretell the future, or dice-like bones, was the common means of consulting the deities. War was the means of obtaining slaves and wives, partly a result of the practice of infanticide and partly because the noble warriors were so successful in attacking their non-Prussian neighbors. The rich married several wives, and brothers were expected to take their father's or brother's wives into their home if widowed. This combination of bigamy and incest particularly shocked their Christian neighbors, who were already unhappy about raids on their frontier settlements for women and children. Drinking was the main entertainment for both men and women, as it was among all northern Europeans.



Because these practices were so opposed to what the Christian missionaries required of their converts, the missionaries met little success in their efforts and often earned martyrdom. Therefore, it had become traditional for missionaries to be accompanied by an armed guard. By the thirteenth century this guard was provided by crusaders. For many decades Polish kings had tried to convert the Prussians by force, but each crusading attempt had ended in failure and ultimately the Poles found themselves on the defensive. Then the Duke of Masovia called the Teutonic Knights to his aid.

Until 1238 the Nattangians had lived quietly. Being considerably distant from those provinces of Prussia where Polish and German crusaders were helping the Teutonic Knights establish themselves, they took no interest in those wars. This decade of neutrality later cost them dearly. The western tribes surrendered one-by-one. The crusader advance continued. Between 1235 and 1238 the Teutonic Knights moved down the Vistula from Thorn to Elbing; then they established themselves at Balga on the coast not far from Nattangia. Now they recognized the threat the crusaders represented to their liberty, their religion, and their traditional way of life.

The Nattangians had been alerted to the danger that the newcomers represented, even though they had not heeded the warning. They had survived Viking raids—but these attacks were different. They knew how to handle naval raids, but they were uncertain how to deal with invaders who came not to raid but to conquer, determined men who lived in a strong castle. Siege warfare was not an art of war practiced among the Prussians, and even though the castle was built of earth and logs, it was no ordinary fortress. It was built for war, not to protect a village and there were no non-combatants or fields to threaten. The enemy had strange weapons that could shoot down men at an unexpectedly long range, were equipped with superior steel weapons and armor, and rode strong war horses which wheeled in formations that the Prussians had never seen before. What was even more impressive, these men had no need to work in the fields, ate unfamiliar vegetables brought in by ship, lived together in dormitories, shared all their possessions, shunned the company of women and relatives, and worshipped in their church night and day. The Prussians feared to fight against such creatures and were hardly sure that they were human beings; but fight they did, because they had to do so.

In 1240 a great army of knights came to Balga from Germany. Led by Duke Otto of Braunschweig, this was a very different group of westerners from the warrior monks of the Teutonic Order. They spent long hours in merriment and conversation, and even longer hours hunting in the forest with dogs and nets. But they were good warriors, too, men who easily captured the chief Nattangian forts and required the natives to undergo baptism. In the course of his year on crusade Duke Otto pacified the entire region and collected many hostages from the nobles. He took the hostages back to Germany with him, and among them was Henry Monte.

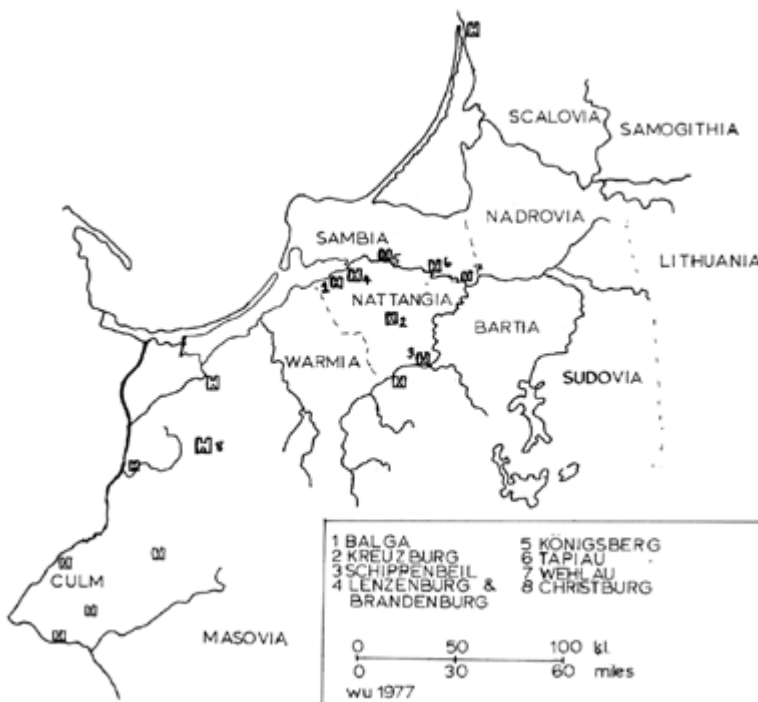
The object of taking the hostages to Germany was to educate them in western ways, so that when they returned home they could teach the gospel and the practices of civilized men to their primitive relatives and subjects. It was not a new idea (not much different from the modern practice of offering scholarships to foreign students), and it worked well. Like the other hostages, Henry Monte learned German and observed life among his hosts, but he did not grasp the essential ideas underlying western civilization— or, if he did, he rejected them. He was not to use his knowledge in the way that the crusaders expected.

The year after he had been taken away to Magdeburg, his countrymen revolted. The Teutonic Knights had moved too fast and too ruthlessly to establish western economic methods in the countryside. They had gathered the natives from their isolated farmsteads into villages and required them to work the fields communally. To keep them together, the order forbade the farmers to move away or even to marry outside the community. They gave monopolies to the merchants who

settled there, and distributed privileges to the millers and other artisans who were imported into the country from Germany and Poland. These were not all new professions, because the Prussians were not completely primitive, but the conversion to a cash economy and the requirement that the natives use these special services was a surprise that they had not expected. In Germany this economic system was bringing wealth and considerable freedom to the peasantry and enriching the nobility, too. But the Nattangians rejected it, neither commoner nor noble seeing advantages in it for them, and gave the system no chance to prove itself. They rose in revolt and threw out the Germans and their God.

The revolt lasted a decade. Although most of the Prussians had surrendered by 1249, the Nattangians still resisted. Late in 1249 they surrounded a large force of Teutonic Knights and accepted an offer to surrender on terms. The Nattangians broke their word, however, and slaughtered fifty of these Knights and all their hundreds of troops. Some they tortured to death. It was a striking confirmation of the crusaders' prejudice that the pagans were so far outside the western moral system that paganism could not be allowed to survive. The Teutonic Knights raised new armies; and in 1251 and 1252 crusading expeditions from Germany crushed the Nattangians and forced the tribe to surrender. After that, the hostages must have been brought home, although a few Nattangians went into exile and continued to raid the Christianized lands from Sudovia until 1256.

Like other Christianized nobles, Henry Monte must have served in the wars that the Teutonic Knights conducted in Sambia between 1252 and 1255 and against the Nadrovia, Sudovians, and Scalovians in the following five years. Because military service was required of all converts, particularly of the nobles, Henry had a formidable military reputation by 1260 when he was chosen to lead his people in revolt against the Teutonic Order. Later he showed himself to be a gifted commander, with a thorough knowledge of the crusaders' mentality and methods of warfare. This was the fruit of his military experience during his youth and early manhood, fighting beside the best warriors of western Europe.



The Teutonic Knights had striven to win the loyalty of the Prussian nobles and to integrate them into their feudal government. They had given them written confirmations of their lands, extended their rights over the peasantry to equal those exercised by immigrant knights, and given them posts of responsibility and honor in the army. German-born advocates lived among the Prussians to train their army and to preside at court trials. These men ate and drank with the nobles regularly, and invited them to parties in the castles. They were to be friends and models, and, as celibate monks, were to demonstrate the new virtue of Christianity. Priests dwelt in the villages, so as to give personal instruction to the new converts and see to their spiritual welfare. Many Germans spoke the native tongue fluently. Some Prussians responded to this well and adapted to the feudal customs; others did not. Henry Monte was among the latter.

Henry's attitude must have been similar to that of those Samogithian nobles who allowed the truce to expire in 1259, as described in *the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle*:

The nobles of Samogithia prepared a carouse, and many were happy to attend. They drank and were merry. Their leader spoke thus: "I am pleased to see so many heroes, and I will rejoice in you so long as I live. You Samogithians should strive for glory and attack the Christians night and day. You've been quiet long enough. You should renew the raids and with manly hand ravage the lands of the Christians." This speech pleased the nobles and their pledged to their gods there at the party to renew the war.

Simply speaking, they wanted a return to paganism and military glory. And, since they were successful in their war, they gave new life to pagan ideals among the Prussians.

In 1260 the Samogithians defeated a crusader army from Livonia and Prussia which included levies from Sambia, Nattangia, and Warmia. Many loyal native nobles stood beside the Teutonic Knights to face certain death when the disaffected Kurs from Livonia withdrew from the fighting and provoked a general panic among the foot-soldiers. Other nobles, among whom was Henry Monte, fled and allowed the others to die fighting for the time that permitted the fugitives to escape. The disaster was so complete that several Livonian tribes rebelled against the weakened order, and, because the sea was closed by winter storms, these tribes had several initial successes.

Soon the Prussians organized a conspiracy against the crusader government. Too astute to attempt a wild, uncoordinated insurrection that was doomed to failure, the nobles chose leaders and set a date when everyone would attack at once. There were, of course, a few hotheads who would not wait, thereby endangering the entire plot. The Nattangians around Leuzenburg struck prematurely in the hope of assassinating their advocate at a drinking party:

They were seated conversing with one another and enjoying themselves when someone put out the light and began to attack the advocate with slashes and thrusts so that he would have been killed if he had not been wearing his armor secretly. Immediately after the light was relit, the advocate showed the cuts and slashes in his clothing and asked his guests what punishment such a sneaking murderer deserved. They all answered that anyone guilty of such a crime should be burned. Later the brother invited them to visit him in the same castle many times, as if nothing had happened and treated them kindly. But when they were drunk they began to talk about killing him. When he heard that talk about him he went out and barred the door. Then he set it on fire and burned his guests and his castle together.

In September of 1260 the conspiracy matured in a tremendously successful and coordinated revolt in Sambia, Nattangia, Barta, and Warmia. The rebels slaughtered the priests, the merchants, and the other Germans who were in the country, and massacred those natives they suspected of being loyal to the regime. Women and children were carried off into slavery, perhaps sold over Russia to the Tartars or Turks, perhaps kept for pleasure and onerous work.

Each tribe besieged those castles located in its part of Prussia. Henry Monte led the attack on Kreuzberg, building three forts around the castle to prevent the garrison from either reaping the crops or sallying out in raids on the rebel communities. Since the castles could not be stormed successfully, the Prussians besieged them. The siege of Kreuzberg was long and weary.

In January of 1261 the first crusading armies arrived in Prussia to relieve the beleaguered castles. One of these, composed of Polish crusaders and German knights from the Magdeburg area, came to Nattangia. Henry Monte knew how to resist these inexperienced warriors—he withdrew into the forests, offering no opposition at all. Soon the crusaders divided into two bodies, as was customary, one sallying out to raid and the other guarding the camp and the booty. Not having seen any Prussians, the troops at camp were not on their guard when Henry Monte suddenly attacked. He killed or captured every man and frightened the surviving part of the army into retreat. Then he disposed of the prisoners.

The first duty of a religious Prussian was to offer a proper sacrifice to the gods. The native priests drew lots to see which prisoner would be chosen. A German chronicle told the story:

Twice the lot fell upon a certain citizen of Magdeburg, a noble and cleric named Hirtzhals, who in fear pleaded with Henry Monte, asking in memory of all he had done for him when he was in Magdeburg, to free him from this. Hearing this Henry had pity, and freed him from the first two drawings. But when it fell on him the third time, he would not release him, but willingly offered him after his confession to God, tied him upon his horse, and burned him.

Henry was not so devout a pagan that he would not set aside the will of the gods twice; but he did not dare to defy the repeated divine choice of a victim. Probably the pagan dead were burned with all their possessions and war equipment, even though weapons and good armor were expensive and in short supply.

The Nattangians continued the siege of Kreuzberg. By 1262 the garrison was reduced to eating cattle and horse hides and many knights lost their teeth from that diet. In 1263 the garrison abandoned the castle, slipping away secretly. Henry Monte alertly followed the starving escapees, forced them to fight, and killed all but two who made their way to safety.

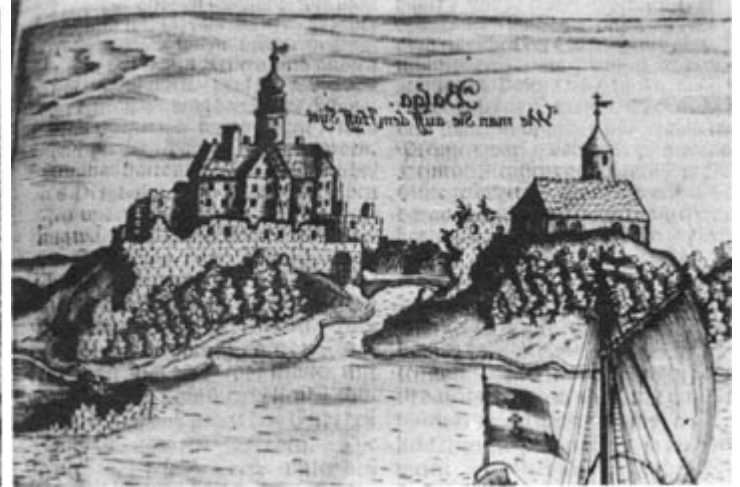
Once that dangerous castle had been destroyed—the pagans never considered garrisoning it themselves—he hurried to Königsberg where the siege was going badly for the Sambians. When his army arrived, the Sambians had given up a close watch of the castle, allowing the Teutonic Knights to reopen water communication with the west. A German chronicler described the battle:

When the brothers came out with their troops to fight their opponents manly. Henry Monte, seeing far off brother Henry Ulenbusch drawing a crossbow, rode up to him crying, "Today I will send you to Heaven." and he ran him through with his lance, wounded him badly, although he was later healed of this wound. Seeing this, a certain sergeant wounded Henry with a small lance, thus revenging him. Weakened from this wound, he withdrew with his army from this business.

The injury did not stop Henry Monte for long. Soon he led his men against Königsberg again, and this time he captured the city below the castle and destroyed it. Later in 1263 he led the Nattangians to distant Culm probably hoping to force the Teutonic Knights to keep more of their men there on garrison duty and thus weaken the frontier forces nearer Nattangia. The raid came as a complete surprise:

With a big army he invaded the land of Culm, and took an incalculable booty of men and other things, which he took away with him, and burned every building outside fortified walls and colored that Christian land with blood. When this came to the ears of Master Helmeric, he called all the men of his army and followed him to the land of Lubow, where he prepared his army for battle and attacked them strongly. The Prussians resisted strongly at first, but then fled, and the Christians dispersed in pursuit of them, and were killing many of them when the Prussians saw that there were only a few of them around the battle flag, and they joined together to return to the fight, and began a new war that lasted long until God, whose justice is incomprehensible, permitted them to kill the master, the marshal, brother Theodoric, and forty knights, and the entire army of the Christians, and caused such loss among the people God that it was considered greater than that in the conflict in Kurland; although the number of dead was not so great, these were all outstanding and skilful men, whose knowledge and energy in Prussia and in war were lost.

From that time on, Prussian raids into Culm were more frequent and more devastating, but they seem to have been conducted by Sudovians and Lithuanians. Henry Monte is mentioned in only one context—among those rebels educated in Germany who used their knowledge of the language and habits to lure small groups of crusaders into ambush. These met the Germans in the woods and volunteered to act as guides, then led the strangers straight to destruction.



Henry Monte was probably absent from the fighting in Culm because of the need to aid the Sambians in 1264 and 1265, because that tribe was slowly succumbing to the relentless attacks of the Teutonic Order. But it was difficult for him to render meaningful aid to the Sambians, because the Pregel river was defended by strong castles at Königsberg, Tapiau and Wehlau and therefore could be crossed easily and safely only in winter-time. Therefore, the Sambians had to fight alone during the warm half of the year.

Henry Monte was on the defensive in Nattangia in 1265-1266, when the crusader Dukes of Brandenburg built a castle on the seashore in Nattangia. The marshal of the order collected a large force of knights there in 1266 and raided deep into the countryside. But he took chances that provided Henry with opportunities to retaliate. On one expedition near Kreuzburg, the marshal left so few men in the castle that the Warmians were able to attack by surprise and overwhelm all the defenders except those who took refuge in the keep; those later escaped by sea and allowed the rebels to destroy the fortification. Duke Otto of Brandenburg returned in early 1267 to rebuild the castle, which became a base for deadly attacks; moreover, it was never again threatened seriously.

There is almost no record of Henry Monte's activities from 1267 to 1272, although other eastern Prussian tribes were raiding in the western provinces of Prussia and even into Poland. Perhaps the Nattangians were sheltering the homes of the raiders during their absence, since the Nattangians stood directly before the castles of Balga, Brandenburg, Königsberg, Tapiau, and Wehlau, thereby providing a screen for the Sudovians. They must have suffered many losses in the raids that were the means of warfare, but the chroniclers did not bother to describe minor campaigns, and the major fighting was in Sambia and Culm.

In 1272 the Teutonic Knights near Nattangia were reinforced by a large crusading army led by Count Dietrich of Meissen. His father and brother had each crusaded in Prussia and many of his followers must have had fathers or other relatives who had been there before. In company with the master, the crusaders stormed one pagan stronghold, killed one hundred and fifty defenders, and for three days thereafter they killed, pillaged, and burned. Although fifty of the crusaders died in the scattered fighting, many more Nattangians perished. This expedition appears to have broken the Nattangian will to resist. Henry Monte and a handful of followers fled into the woods to continue the war from exile, but most of their people surrendered and accepted resettlement in areas under Christian control. This was necessary because they now became targets of Sudovian and Lithuanian raids.

Henry did not survive long. He went to western Prussia to fight. There, in 1273, the commander of Christburg found him in a tent, alone. His companions were out hunting, and no one was on watch. The chronicler's glee was apparent in his description of the incident:

And when they saw that they had caught Henry Monte, they rejoiced and tied him to a tree (which he deserved) and ran him through with a sword. And so the devil's warrior died, and received what he had earned.

Whether or not this peculiar form of execution was a parody of the pagan ritual of killing the first prisoner captured on each raid is not clear, but no other rebel leader died in this way. Others died fighting, or were hanged, or even burned (early in the rising). Henry's death was unique, and with his death, the war in Nattangia was over. Some survivors were made into serfs—the penalty for rebellion— and the other Nattangians—including those nobles who had cast their lot with the Teutonic Order early—fought to defend their estates against Sudovian raids.

Henry Monte became a mythic figure. For future generations of Prussians and Lithuanians he was a symbol of resistance to German oppression. Henry the myth was not Henry the historical figure—no mythic symbol is. Henry was the Robin Hood, the William Tell, of the Prussian revolt. He stood for all the honor, courage, decency of the pagan way of life. That it was a way of life no suited to the modern world was unimportant. The subject peoples did not consider the fact that it was a cruel and backward system; they only compared their former freedom and pride, their military glory and comparative riches, to the unhappy state of subjection to a foreign law and a foreign God. Henry symbolized the honored past generations as they were best remembered. He symbolized freedom in an age of serfdom and oppressive service.

Later, in pre-revolutionary Lithuania, he became a popular literary figure. Because Lithuanian ethnologists insisted that the Prussians were a branch of the Lithuanian people—different in some aspects of language and culture as were Samogithians and Sudovians, but still essentially Lithuanian—he was seen not as a foreign hero, but a national hero equal or superior to his thirteenth century contemporaries, Mindaugas and Lengewin.

Henry personified the old system at its best. Unfortunately, history may honor its noble figures, but it rewards only those who are successful. And the divided, backward, military pagan society was not equal to the challenge presented by a unified, progressive, and productive western society which was also militarily capable. The crusaders did not win because they were better warriors or had better leaders, but because they were able to organize the wealth and talent of their society better and bring it to bear in the distant swamps and forests of Prussia. Henry Monte was a talented military leader, but he apparently did nothing to change his society in a way that would enable it to resist the crusaders successfully. Never did the Prussians garrison the castles they captured, employ the mills, retain the three-field system, or even use the weapons they captured (At the siege of Königsberg a pagan warrior was decapitated by a cocked crossbow left behind by a fleeing knight; afterwards no Prussian would even touch such a weapon). As long as the Prussians had that attitude, they were doomed to defeat. Henry was able to rally the Nattangians to display their traditional courage, but he was unable to change their ways of thinking. He was not able to change his own; how could he change that of others? In this was his shortcoming that led to defeat. There is no guarantee that if Henry had changed his thinking, that his people would have survived, or even that defeat was inevitable—the Samogithians did not change much and they did very well for many generations. But the experience of the princes of Mecklenburg, Pomerania, and Lithuania demonstrate that capable leadership can do much to save their people suffering, invasion, and even the loss of their complete freedom. The Lithuanians adapted, changed their barbaric habits, and became the rulers of vast reaches of Russia.

Henry resisted the new order valiantly, but it was a vain resistance because the new order was too strong. His courage and stubbornness led not to a new freedom— because the pagan system meant real freedom only for a relatively small group of nobles—but to serfdom for the masses, a serfdom that had few redeeming features because it was imposed and not accepted willingly as part of an economic system that brought greater wealth and order to everyone. The Prussian nobles survived—the name Monte is found at the end of the century in crusader land records— but never again were they trusted with honors and responsibilities had they had been before the great revolt of the 1260s. No longer are the young people sent to Germany to be educated as the future priests and administrators of Prussia. The rulers now are Germans.