

Episode 271. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part 7. King Casimir of Poland.

Hello again. Last week we saw a major battle take place between the Teutonic Order and the Royal Polish forces in Plowce in the year 1331, at which over 4,000 men lost their lives. Although the battle was, on paper, won by the Teutonic Order, really there were more positives in the result for the loser rather than for the winner. The Teutonic Order had behaved rather regrettably, ordering the execution of 600 Polish prisoners, and, while the Polish forces had lost, they had managed to keep the Teutonic forces from gaining a foothold on Polish territory; and, if there had been a public relations contest between the two sides, the Polish forces had definitely won that battle, with the site of the conflict being the focus of patriotic Polish pilgrimages for many years afterwards.

Now, you might remember that Grand Master Luther's plan for the Samogitian Crusade involved two steps: the first step being to contain Poland, which would keep the Polish Royal forces out of Samogitia, allowing him to concentrate on the second step, which of course was taking Samogitia. Around six months after the Battle of Plowce, Grand Master Luther was ready to once again have a crack at taking the first step in his plan, so he led a large army of Teutonic forces, mercenaries and crusaders out of Prussia in the spring of 1332, and led them into Kujavia, eventually managing to secure all of northern Kujavia.

A few months later, King Wladislaw, who, once again was experiencing quite serious ill health, attempted, without success, to expel the Order from his lands. King Wladislaw requested a truce, and with Papal assistance it was granted, with the terms to run until mid 1333. However, by the time the year 1333 had rolled around, King Wladislaw had died, and his son, Prince Casimir, was crowned as King of Poland.

Now, a few of you are probably wincing to hear Casimir crowned as King, because so far in our narrative Casimir has appeared to be a bit of a goose, what with his ill-considered affair with his sister's lady-in-waiting leading to a diplomatic headache between Poland and Hungary, and his military skills being dubious to say the least, with some Polish fighters even deserting when they were advised that Casimir, and not his father King Wladislaw, would be commanding their forces.

Well, you needn't worry. Casimir is actually going to be a gob-smackingly successful monarch. In fact, it's hard to overstate just how successful he will be. He ends up being brilliant as just about everything: diplomacy, warfare, economics. You name it, Casimir was awesome at it.

Here's a very condensed of just some of the things he achieved during his reign: He doubled the size of his Kingdom; rebuilt and reformed the Polish army; established the Kingdom's first university at Krakow; encouraged Jewish people to move to Poland; built a bunch of impressive castles; overhauled the entire judicial system; and did his best to foster greater equality amongst his subjects, introducing reforms designed to increase the rights of peasants and the lower classes, while attempting to rein in the power of the nobility. In fact, just about the only thing that King Casimir, or "Casimir the Great" as he is now known, was not good at was producing a male heir. He in fact only fathered a bunch of daughters, meaning that he had no successor, and was in fact the last King of the Piast dynasty.

Anyway, one of King Casimir's first priorities when he was crowned in the year 1333 was to try to forge a peace between Poland and the Teutonic Order. In fact, peace negotiations will take place between King Casimir, King John of Bohemia, and the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order numerous times over the next decade or so, with probably the most memorable talks taking place in the year 1335, at the castle at Wyszogrod in the Kingdom of Hungary, the same castle in which 19 year old Prince Casimir had carried on his ill-conceived affair with his sister's lady-in-waiting, back in Episode 268.

Now, in his book "The Samogitian Crusade", William Urban describes this conference as being one of the most famous of the Middle Ages, with the attendees mixing many weeks of negotiations with the fine entertainment and pleasures that this castle had to offer, being at that time, according to William Urban, the finest summer residence in all of eastern-central Europe. Attending the conference was King Casimir, King John of Bohemia, King Charles Robert of Hungary, and the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order. The Grand Master of the Teutonic Order was, at this time, no longer Grand Master Luther, who had died unexpectedly on a journey to dedicate a new cathedral at Konigsberg.

So the new Grand Master was Dietrich von Altenburg. If the name Dietrich von Altenburg sounds familiar, that's because he was the same Dietrich von Altenburg who had led the Teutonic forces as the Marshall in the Battle of Plowce in our last episode. Prior to becoming Marshall, Grand Master Dietrich had been the castellan of Ragnit Castle, and as Marshall he had led the Teutonic forces to numerous victories, so he was a solid choice for Grand Master during this time of warfare.

And it was a good thing that the new Grand Master was well versed in the ways of military conflict, because while peace negotiations will continue to be discussed over the years between Poland, Hungary, Bohemia and Prussia, the Samogitian Crusade is still ongoing. William Urban describes the Samogitian Crusade during these years as continuing at, and I quote, "an intense but unspectacular level," end quote. Basically, the pagans are being attacked from all sides, with the Teutonic Order leading regular expeditions of crusaders out of Prussia into Samogitia, while the Livonian Chapter of the Order is leading attacks from their holdings at Memel, Goldingen, Mittau, Riga and Dunaburg to the north.

Now, last time we visited Livonia, back in Episode 269, peace had descended, with the destructive civil war having at last come to an end. The peace in Livonia will in fact last another ten years or so, when there will be an uprising in Estonia. Back in Samogitia, despite frequent raids, battles and conflicts across vast portions of Samogitia, nothing decisive will happen for the next few years, which is what William Urban meant, most likely, when he described the Crusade at this time, as being intense but unspectacular. So, the next event which we need to discuss doesn't take place until the year 1337, four years after the commencement of King Casimir's reign, and this is where we will take up the narrative.

The beginning of the year 1337 saw a large crusading expedition make its way to Samogitia. Heading up the Crusader forces were King John of Bohemia and Duke Heinrich of Bavaria, and their army included crusaders from Bohemia, Bavaria and from across the Holy Roman Empire. It even included some men from as far west as Burgundy. The Teutonic Knights joined the expedition, along with some militia from Natangia and Samland, and the focus of the campaign seemed to be less about killing or converting pagans, and more about building an enormous stronghold.

A site was chosen near the ruins of Christmemel Castle, which you might remember, collapsed back in Episode 268. The new structure was huge, and was made of wood and rammed earth. It was named Beierberg, in honor of Duke Heinrich of Bavaria and his father, Duke Heinrich's father being the current Holy Roman Emperor Louis IV. Beierberg was intended to function as a base for the Order's raids across Samogitia, and was even touted as a stopover point for larger expeditions heading to central Lithuania. It was for this reason that Gediminas decided that Beierberg Castle needed to be destroyed.

Destroying such a new, large fortification, though, was easier said than done. In the summer of 1337 Gediminas led a Lithuanian army to Beierberg and besieged it for 22 days, then was forced to withdraw without having achieved anything other than quite heavy losses amongst his own forces. William Urban reports that Gediminas failed to destroy his siege weapons as he withdrew, so the garrison of the castle collected them after the Lithuanians had departed and mounted them on the castle walls.

While Gediminas was clearly having a bad time at this stage in the narrative, King John was faring much worse. One of his eyes had become infected during a recent crusade, and the infection worsened on his journey home to Bohemia. He consulted a French doctor on his way through Silesia, but he was so unhappy with the quality of the service he received that he ordered the unfortunate man to be drowned in a local river.

Back in Prague, he consulted a Middle Eastern doctor, but even he was unable to help, and the infection spread to King John's other eye. The result was that King John became totally blind. Now, most medieval warriors confronted with the reality of no longer being able to see anything at all would retire to their firesides and let others take over the day-to-day running of their kingdom. But we all know that King John was a restless sort of a man, who was easily bored, and was constantly seeking adventure and, oddly, being totally blind didn't seem to slow him down at all. As William Urban states, and I quote, "it was no hindrance, either in war or in diplomacy" end quote.

King John's first task in his newly blind state was to try to negotiate a truce with King Casimir. Now, King Casimir had spent the past four years learning the ropes and beginning to gain the skills which he would later use to turn Poland into a modern, powerful kingdom, and to elevate himself to the status of "Casimir the Great". He also has spent the time lurching from disaster to disaster in his personal life. His wife, who you might remember was Gediminas' daughter, and whose name was Anna, had been seriously ill for the first few years of his reign. Anna then died and Casimir found himself looking for a new wife, one who hopefully could bear him a son and heir, as he was currently the father to two daughters.

King John of Bohemia came up with the brilliant idea that Casimir could marry one of his daughters, Margaret, which would form the basis of an alliance between Poland and Bohemia. Casimir agreed to the marriage proposal, but William Urban reports that the unfortunate Margaret actually died literally the night before the wedding was due to take place in Prague. King Casimir then launched straight into another ill-advised alliance with a woman called Adelheid of Hessen whom William Urban describes as, and I quote, "an unattractive heiress," end quote. King Casimir married the unattractive heiress, whose father then failed to pay the large dowry which was meant to accompany the union. As a result King Casimir, according to William Urban, and I quote, "sent her into the country and refused to see her again," end quote.

In case anyone is interested, King Casimir married another two times during his lifetime, but both of these marriages occurred while Adelheid was still alive, still living in the country, so there were serious questions raised about the legitimacy of these final two marriages, and the legitimacy of the three daughters produced by those marriages. However King Casimir managed to get the Pope to eventually declare all three girls his legitimate daughters. Just to complete the picture of King Casimir's car crash of a personal life, he did eventually manage to father a son, but that was with his long-term mistress and occasional adviser, and there was nothing any Pope could do to make him Casimir's legitimate heir. So the Piast line ended with Casimir's death.

Oh dear, where were we? Ah yes, King Casimir's ill-fated marriage alliance with Bohemia. In the end King Casimir brought his kingdom closer to Hungary, which was probably a better fit anyway than Bohemia, by declaring that the heir to the Hungarian throne would also inherit the Polish throne in the event that Casimir died with no male heir, which was eventually exactly what happened.

OK, back to crusading. Now, crusading was still taking place in Samogitia, with expeditions leaving Prussia to go and attack the pagans, and with the pagans attacking them straight back. Neither the Teutonic Order nor the crusaders were able to gain the upper hand over the pagans, while on the other side of the equation the pagans were unable to permanently force the Latin Christians back from their borders.

Around this time trading alliances were being formed between the merchants of Livonia and Gediminas' Russian vassals, which enabled uninterrupted trade to take place all the way from Riga overland to Novgorod.

Then, in the winter of 1341-1342 Gediminas died. As was the case with Vytenis before him, it's unclear how Gediminas died, although, in his book "Lithuania Ascending", S. C. Rowell points out that it's unlikely that he died battling the Latin Christians, as some mention would have been made of that fact in the Latin Christian chronicles. So other than that, we really don't know how he died. Lithuania itself was now to be divided amongst Gediminas' seven heirs and, with the possibility of civil conflict breaking out between the seven new rulers, the Teutonic Order was rubbing its hands together, believing that total victory for the Latin Christians in the Samogitian Crusade was now only a hop, skip and jump away.

But, of course, spoiler alert, that wasn't the case at all. Samogitia will remain pagan for many years to come. But the Teutonic Order, it will be pleased to know, will rise to new heights, entering a phase which it regarded as its golden era. Join me next week when we pop back to Livonia, where a decade of peace has passed, and the Great Estonian Insurrection is about to kick off. Until next week, bye for now.

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