

## History Of The Crusades. Episode 275. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part 8. Grand Duke Algirdas of Lithuania.

Hello again. Last week we brought the narrative in Livonia up to the year 1346, with the end of the Great Estonian Insurrection, which was effectively concluded with the purchase of Estonia from the Danish Crown by the Teutonic Order. We last left the Samogitian Crusade early in the year 1342, nearly a decade into the reign of the new King of Poland, Casimir III, also known as Casimir the Great, with the death of the Lithuanian ruler Gediminas. So we have around four years of narrative to cover, to bring the Samogitian Crusade to the same point in the timeline as the Livonian Crusade.

Now, we are fortunate at this moment in the Baltic Crusades to have two of history's great nation builders walking the stage. We have already met King Casimir of Poland, and we encountered Algirdas of Lithuania in our last episode. Algirdas is about to cause all sorts of headaches for the Prussian Chapter of the Teutonic Order, so let's zoom down and take a closer look at him.

Now, like King Casimir of Poland, Algirdas of Lithuania will enjoy a long and fruitful period of rule, and will expand his territory to cover an extensive region of land, probably not even dreamed about in the minds of Gediminas or Vytenis before him. But, unlike Casimir, Algirdas wasn't set to take over the reins of power upon the death of his father Gediminas. As we discussed in last week's episode, when Gediminas died his seven heirs were left to rule a divided Lithuania. Now, Gediminas himself decreed which of his seven heirs, consisting of his six sons and his brother, would rule over which region. Now, we all know that Gediminas was a fair-minded, reasonable sort of a person, who had done his best to extend the hand of conciliation to the Latin Christians in his region. His fair-handedness seemed to extend to the manner in which he decided to leave Lithuania following his death. It would, of course, had been easier had he just been able to hand the whole of Lithuania to just one of his sons following his death, in the same manner as King Casimir had inherited the Kingdom of Poland, but had Gediminas done this it is likely that the six other, now disinherited claimants, would have been unhappy, resulting in civil unrest, and possible attempts to overthrow the rule of the single chosen heir. So instead, Gediminas divided his territory into seven parts, and allocated each part to one of his seven heirs.

Now, I'm no expert in Gediminas' frame of mind, but he seems to have divided up his territory on a sort of a handicap system. You know the handicap system that's used in horse racing, where each horse, according to its abilities, is allocated a certain weight to carry during the race, with the more talented and faster horses being allocated extra weight, with the theory that the extra weight will slow them down, so that in a perfectly handicapped race all the horses would finish the race at exactly the same time? Well, Gediminas appears to have used a similar system in allocating territory to his seven heirs. The most central and the most powerful piece of territory, the central highlands at the core of Lithuania with its great fortress at Vilnius being its capital, was awarded to the youngest, least experienced and most immature of his sons, who was called Jaunutis. Another one of the younger sons, Kestutis, was granted the remainder of Lithuania, while, at the other end of the scale, Algirdas, who while not the eldest son was probably the most competent, was given the Russian region of Vitebsk. The next most competent son after Algirdas was allocated the Principality of Polotsk, and the other sons and Gediminas' brother, all of whom were not quite as inexperienced as Jaunutis and Kestutis, but also not as talented as Algirdas, scored other parts of Gediminas' Russian holdings. Perhaps Gediminas believed that allocating his territory in this manner would smooth over the differences in

competency between all of his heirs, and ensure that easily-ruled Lithuania wouldn't prove too taxing for his young sons, while Algirdas would be too mired down trying to wrestle the region of Vitebsk (which used to be part of Polotsk) into submission, to worry about invading the lands now held by his uncle and his brothers. But, if that was Gediminas' intention, things didn't quite work out that way.

Clearly the region which everyone wanted was the one ruled by Jaunutis from his base at Vilnius. Now, poor Jaunutis really was pretty hopeless at governing. He may have been assisted by his mother, but in his book "Lithuania Ascending", S. C. Rowell notes that it's unclear whether this was actually the case, or whether he just bumbled along by himself. Gediminas may have intended Jaunutis and his brother who had been allocated the rest of Lithuania proper, Vestutis, to cooperate and rule Lithuania in a sort of a partnership, but it was pretty clear from the outset that that wasn't going to happen, and that the more experienced Kestutis actually intended to depose Jaunutis, and bring all of Lithuania under his control.

In the end, Algirdas, who had moved to gain control over Polotsk and Pskov, and was also frequently raiding into Livonian territory, allied himself with Kestutis. Gradually these two brothers will seize control of all of Gediminas' former lands, and will rule it between them. Kestutis will guard Lithuania's western borders against incursions by the Teutonic Order, Polish invaders, and the Hungarians while Algirdas will expand Lithuanian rule further into the Russian Principalities, while also causing as many headaches as he could for the Teutonic Order in Livonia and Samogitia. Algirdas will eventually declare himself to be the Grand Duke of Lithuania.

Now, as you can imagine, all these power plays taking place in Lithuania and across Lithuania's Russian vassals in the years following Gediminas' death could have spelt disaster for the continued existence of Lithuania. In his book "Lithuania Ascending" however, S. C. Rowell points out that it was truly fortunate for the Lithuanians that, at the same time as the succession issues were playing out, King Casimir of Poland was distracted by issues elsewhere, as were the Tartar Khans of Russia, who also could have taken advantage of the chaotic situation. Assisting the fact that Lithuania was pretty much left alone to sort out its internal struggles was the fact that the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order at this time was arguably one of its most unpopular and least effective, a man called Ludolf Konig.

The Teutonic Order knew that it had a chance around the year 1344 to defeat the Lithuanians once and for all. Of course, once the Lithuanians were defeated, a quick and easy victory for the Latin Christians in the Samogitian Crusade would almost certainly follow. The two Lithuanian leaders had conducted numerous successful raids into Livonia in the years 1343 and 1344. William Urban points out in his book "The Samogitian Crusade" that the Great Estonian Insurrection provided a unique opportunity for the Lithuanians to actually defeat Livonia, and turn it into a Lithuanian vassal like the neighboring Russian Principalities. However William Urban states that the two Lithuanian leaders seem not to have realized this. They limited themselves to continual raiding into Livonia, which netted them slaves and booty in satisfying quantities. But they didn't match their military successes with any political push to ally themselves with local Livonian rebels, and they failed to recognize the opportunity that the vulnerable state of Livonia presented to them. The same situation occurred in reverse a year or so later, for the Teutonic Order. With the two Lithuanian leaders still finding their feet, a well-organized

successful crusade against Lithuania had the potential to reap enormous benefits, including the possible total defeat of pagan Lithuania.

It looked like such a crusade would take place in the winter of 1344-1344. A number of wealthy and powerful European leaders, including the totally blind King John of Bohemia, King John's son Charles of Moravia, along with King Louis of Hungary, mustered a number of crusaders from France and from the Kingdom of Germany and Austria in the Holy Roman Empire, and they gathered in Prussia ready to set out on a major expedition to Lithuania. However, only two days after they set out to travel to Lithuania, the weather began to become unseasonably warm. Rain, not snow, began to fall, turning the ground into a slushy mess and making the ice, over which the crusader warhorses were required to travel, dangerously thin. Grand Master Ludolf ordered the crusaders to return to Konigsberg, where they would wait for the cold weather to return. As the men feasted and passed the time in the comfort of Konigsberg, word came in of Lithuanian raids into Livonia, but the weather remained freakishly warm, and the Grand Master was forced to dismiss the crusading force, telling them to reconvene for a summer expedition in mid 1345. William Urban points out that a summer crusade was rather a novelty and therefore attracted quite a number of volunteers, as well as the cream of European nobility, keen to try their hand at defeating the Lithuanians in the pleasant summer weather.

Unfortunately though, the expedition was an embarrassing failure. It started well enough, the large crusading force made its way into Lithuania and besieged a castle. As a chronicler at the time noted, the crusaders, and I quote, "did the heathens great harm and they would have done greater had things gone properly" end quote. The siege was going pretty well and the defeat of the castle was within reach when an urgent message came in for the Grand Master, that message being that the Lithuanians had staged a massive invasion of Prussia, so massive in fact that Prussia itself was in danger of being defeated by the pagans. An alarmed Grand Master Ludolf immediately lifted the siege and raced back to Konigsberg with the crusaders, only to find that there were no Lithuanians near Prussia at all. The rumored attack on Prussia had been a diversion which succeeded completely in its aim to draw the Latin Christians out of Lithuania and to distract them in Prussia while the main Lithuanian army raided into Livonia.

Grand Master Ludolf took full responsibility for the failure, and fell into a period of depression and despondency. The final straw for Grand Master Ludolf came when Charles of Moravia was kidnapped on his way home from the crusade, which was seen as a further abrogation of duty by the Grand Master, whose responsibility it was to ensure the safety of the crusaders. He was forced to resign, and was replaced by one of his fiercest critics, a seasoned warrior who had been Marshall of the Teutonic forces in Prussia, a man called Heinrich Dusmer. Heinrich Dusmer went on to oversee the purchase of Estonia by the Teutonic Order from the Kingdom of Denmark, but his priority for the first part of his rule was defensive rather than offensive. Instead of crusading against Lithuania or Samogitia, his aim was to secure Livonia, and to protect it from the frequent raids being carried out by the Lithuanians.

Now, Grand Duke Algirdas, the instigator of most of these raids, had a markedly different approach to religious tolerance, and in particular to tolerating the Latin Christian religion, than that displayed by his predecessor Gediminas. Gediminas, as we've seen, was more than happy to let the Latin Christians practice their religion. He opened the door to a bunch of Franciscan friars who established a base in Vilnius, and he would have been happy to let anyone worship whatever they chose without interference from anyone else. With the

rise to power of Algirdas and his brother however came an aggressive sort of paganism which became closely aligned to Lithuanian expansionism. Had there been bumper stickers back in medieval times, Algirdas may well have sported one stating "Pagan and Proud". Whereas Gediminas' attitude was one of "Live and let live", Algirdas' motto may well have been "I'm pagan, you're not, prepare to die". OK, well it wasn't actually quite that black and white. Algirdas realized the need to keep his many Russian subjects happy, so he made no attempt to impose paganism inside the Russian Principalities, but he seemed to harbor a distinct dislike of Latin Christians and their beliefs, and he made no secret of the fact that he would like to conquer both Livonia and Prussia, and incorporate them into pagan Lithuania.

Clearly this factor was to have an impact on crusading in Samogitia. William Urban points out in his book "The Samogitian Crusade" that soon after Algirdas rose to power, the Teutonic Order began to realize that there was much more at stake now than just the fate of a bunch of pagans living in the swamps of Samogitia. They realized, with a dawning alarm, that if Algirdas had his way the very existence of Livonia and Prussia may well be at stake. The Lithuanians just needed to eliminate the Teutonic Order, or drive it back into the Holy Roman Empire from which it came, and then Prussia and Livonia would be theirs for the taking.

So it was time to get serious about crusading. To that end, the new warrior Grand Master made plans to raise a massive crusader army, an army so large that it would be able to eliminate the Lithuanian threat once and for all. Join me next week for our final episode of 2018, as Grand Master Heinrich Dusmer leads tens of thousands of crusaders on a massive campaign deep into the heart of Lithuania. Until next week, bye for now.

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