

History Of The Crusades. Episode 276. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part 9. The Battle On The Strebe.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Teutonic Order come to the dawning realization that the new Grand Duke of Lithuania, Algirdas, who was ruling Lithuania along with his brother Kestutis, was actually a looming threat to the very existence of Latin Christian Prussia and Livonia. Unlike his father and predecessor, Gediminas, Algirdas wasn't too happy to see Latin Christianity spread over the Baltic region, and if Algirdas had his way, the Teutonic Order would be forced to retreat back to the Holy Roman Empire, and pagan Lithuania would then extend its territorial boundaries over both Livonia and Prussia.

Not surprisingly the conclusion quickly reached by the new Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, a seasoned warrior named Heinrich Dusmer, was that the focus of the Teutonic Order's efforts in the region ought no longer to be the conversion of the pagans of Samogitia. No, the new goal was to defeat Lithuania, and prevent Algirdas from achieving his plans for re-paganising Prussia and Livonia. To this end the Grand Master declared that, in early 1348, a major crusading expedition would depart from Prussia and head into Lithuania. Now, the Grand Master was pretty fortunate in the timing of his recruitment of this crusade. A temporary truce had just been declared in the Hundred Years War, which meant that a bunch of bored English and French soldiers were hanging around with nothing to do, and suddenly they found a perfect solution to dealing with all the spare time they had on their hands. That solution was to get themselves to Prussia and prepare for a winter crusade deep into the heart of Lithuania.

Now, those fabulous listeners amongst you who are Patrons of this podcast will know all about the Hundred Years War and the various truces and campaigns which took place, due to the lengthy series which we have nearly completed, which covers Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years War. What's that? You want to become a Patron and listen to a bunch of episodes about the Hundred Years War? Well, you can. All you need to do is go to [patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) and search for The History Of The Crusades Podcast, then sign up to contribute \$1 per month, and bam! All the episodes on the back catalog are yours to listen to, and you will get access to a new episode every fortnight. Woohoo! How's that for a seamless Patreon plug inserted into the narrative. Excuse me while I just enjoy a short moment of self congratulation. Ahh that was good.

Now, where were we? Ah yes, the mustering of a large crusader force in 1348, consisting of a goodly number of English and French soldiers who had previously been occupied fighting each other in the Hundred Years War, and were now going to put those differences aside and fight the Lithuanians. Now, chronicles at the time estimated that the force which gathered in Prussia contained around 40,000 men. However, in his book "The Samogitian Crusade", William Urban points out that this was likely an exaggeration. Still, it must have been an impressive force. But, unfortunately for the Teutonic Order, most of this army won't actually leave Prussia. No, as was often the case, the weather was unkind, forcing the Grand Master to turn back along with most of the army, before they had even marched out of Prussia.

A smaller force of Crusaders, led by the Marshall of the Teutonic forces, Siegfried Dahenfeld, and Grand Commander Winrich von Kniprode, did manage to make it to Lithuania, though. They marched all the way through Samogitia and then into central Lithuania. Once there they went on a pagan-killing rampage, later boasting that they had

killed every Lithuanian they came across. In fact they were having such a great time that they stayed in central Lithuania for seven days. This was a mistake.

Algirdas' brother Kestutis was the ruler of this part of Lithuania, and when he had heard reports of the Teutonic Order massing an enormous army which they intended to use to invade Lithuania, he sent an urgent call out for troops, and eager recruits from as far away as Pskov and Smolensk answered his call. So, now Kestutis was in the happy position of having a large army under his command, an army about which the Teutonic Order was unaware, and he was also facing a much smaller foe, with only the smaller force headed by the Marshall and Grand Commander making the trip to Lithuania, with the Grand Master and most of the other crusaders remaining behind in Prussia. So it wasn't really that difficult at all for Kestutis to gather his army and surround the Teutonic forces, who were eventually forced to retreat until they could go no further, having been pinned against a large frozen river, called the River Strebe.

Now, the options facing the Marshall and Grand Commander at this point in time weren't great. As William Urban points out in his book "The Samogitian Crusade", the frozen river could only hold a few knights at a time, so to retreat back over the river, which they needed to do to make it back to Prussia, would be a lengthy and dangerous exercise, with the Lithuanians likely to attack the army as soon as enough of their knights had made the crossing to the other side. The second option would be to wait and see what happened, however this was impractical. It was freezing cold and the food supplies were running low and wouldn't last for any significant amount of time. The third option was to go on the offensive, to push back against the Lithuanian army which had trapped them on the river bank, by mounting an attack. In the end the Marshall and the Grand Commander conferred, and decided that the third option, mounting an attack, was the only honorable course available to the crusaders. So they lined up into battle formation and attempted to goad the Lithuanian forces into charging their lines, believing that they stood the best chance of survival if they stood and defended themselves against a Lithuanian charge, instead of running forwards into attack themselves. Now, Kestutis would also have preferred to defend the Lithuanian position, rather than going on the attack. Just like the Teutonic Order, the Lithuanian army was low on supplies, and some of the warriors who had traveled a long distance to join the army were suffering in the freezing weather. So, when both armies stood facing each other, holding their positions, it was the Lithuanians who broke first and who ran forwards into attack.

The Lithuanians commenced their assault with a volley of arrows loosed by the Lithuanian archers into the line of waiting Latin Christian fighters. Then Kestutis sent his horsemen forward, directing them to attack the main body of mounted Teutonic Knights. The Lithuanian horsemen threw spears at the Teutonic Knights as soon as they were within range. Then they surged forward, with the rest of the Lithuanian army streaming into battle behind the horsemen. The Teutonic army was pushed back against the frozen river, and hand-to-hand fighting began. Then the mounted Teutonic Knights were directed to charge into the Lithuanian lines, then circle around behind the Lithuanian forces, and attack them from the rear. The Teutonic Knights succeeded in executing this maneuver, and the panicked Lithuanian forces, who were now being attacked from the front as well as the rear, broke and scattered, and were then hunted down and killed. In his book "The Samogitian Crusade", William Urban reports that some of the Lithuanian horsemen tried to flee by riding across the frozen Strebe River, but the ice broke from underneath them and they drowned in the icy waters.

The result was a clear victory for the Teutonic forces. Chroniclers from Prussia reported that only 60 men from the crusader army had been killed, while between 10,000 and 18,000 men fighting for Lithuania had perished. William Urban points out that these figures were likely exaggerated, but regardless of the exact numbers, the end result was a clear victory for the Teutonic Order, with extensive casualties on the Lithuanian side.

Now, as you might imagine, this loss was a devastating event for both Kestutis and his brother Algirdas. Before the Battle on the Strebe, the two Lithuanian rulers hadn't suffered any significant military defeats. Now, after a complete routing by the Latin Christians, the Lithuanians were likely concerned that the pagan Gods were no longer smiling on them, and that their fighting words about the pagan Gods being more powerful than the Christian God might just be wishful thinking and hot air. The defeat also caused many of Lithuania's Russian vassals to question whether the Lithuanians would be able to successfully defend them against the Tartar Khans, who were much more aggressive than the Teutonic forces. And just to cap off the misery which flowed in Lithuania's direction following the Battle on the Strebe, the deaths of so many experienced Lithuanian fighters in the battle severely depleted the Lithuanian army, and reduced the pool of men from which the army could be summoned in times of need.

As such, when Crusader forces raided into Samogitia in the months after the battle, Kestutis was unable to provide much assistance to the Samogitians, and likewise when the Samogitian fortress at Velan was attacked in the same year, the Samogitian garrison was left to its own devices. Without Lithuanian help, Velan fell to the crusader forces. Fifteen hundred Samogitians were taken prisoner by the Latin Christians following the fall of Welun. The pagan prisoners were marched back to Prussia, were forcibly converted to Christianity, and were resettled in Prussia. After the fall of Welun, the only remaining Samogitian stronghold which was able to block the route up the Nemunas River into Lithuania, was the fortress at Kaunas.

However, despite these dire indications that things were about to go horribly wrong for Lithuania, the Teutonic Order was unable to follow through on its victory on the Strebe. Why? Well there were two reasons. The first reason was that Grand Master Heinrich Dusmer, who had been the driving force behind the attack on Lithuania, became seriously ill, and no longer had the focus or the strength to organize the Teutonic Knights, and build on the inroads the Latin Christians had made in countering Lithuanian aggression. Grand Master Heinrich Dusmer struggled on for a couple more years, but was eventually convinced to resign in the year 1351, dying not long afterwards.

The second reason why the Teutonic Order was unable to mobilize in any substantial way against the Lithuanians was the fact that in Easter of 1349, a little over one year after the Battle on the Strebe, the plague came to both Prussia and Livonia. As was the case in other parts of Europe, the death toll was devastating. William Urban reports in his book "The Samogitian Crusade", that so many people died of the plague in Samland that a mass cremation of the bodies was carried out, an indication of how overwhelming the death toll must have been, as cremation was always avoided in Prussia, due to its ties with paganism.

As was the case in other European countries, the arrival of the plague, combined with absolutely zero understanding of what caused it or how to treat it, led to some rather extreme behaviors manifesting amongst the Prussian people. Self-flagellation along with public mass flagellation became popular, as well as groups of desperate people suffered

whippings in an attempt to inspire Divine pity or Divine intervention, to halt the plague's progress. Across central Europe and particularly in the Kingdom of Germany, the finger of blame was pointed at the local Jewish population, which was accused of poisoning wells with the disease which caused the plague. The pogrom against the Jewish population in Germany was so severe that tens of thousands of Jews fled from the Holy Roman Empire, some of them making their way to Prussia, where they attempted to resettle. William Urban reports that most of the Jewish people who made it to Prussia were left alone to rebuild their lives, but there was a report of one Jewish person being burnt alive in Gotland, having been found guilty of the charge of poisoning wells in Prussia and Kurland.

Interestingly there were no widespread reports of deaths in Lithuania due to the plague. William Urban states that this may have been due to the fact that many Lithuanians lived in relative isolation deep in the forests, but he also points out that there were few records kept of such deaths in Lithuania, so perhaps the lack of records led early historians to wrongly conclude that the plague hadn't been so severe in Lithuania.

So everyone is having a bad time at the moment, with the Latin Christians of Prussia struggling to deal with the plague, and the Lithuanians still reeling from the devastating losses they incurred at the Battle on the Strebe. Will they recover to fight another day? Of course they will.

But we are about to go on our annual break, so we won't be rejoining the Samogitian Crusade or the Livonian Crusade until mid-February next year. Now, if you are struggling to cope with the thought of a pod-vacuum during that time, might I suggest that you fill this vacuum with episodes from the History Of The Crusades Patreon feed. Unlike the free History Of The Crusades Podcasts feed, the subscription History Of The Crusades Podcast feed is not taking a break, so my dear and valued patrons will continue to receive their fortnightly episodes throughout the festive season and during my summer break. Just listen to the promo at the end of this episode to find out how to join up.

In other news some transcripts from later episodes on the Baltic Crusades are now available. Woohoo! Listener Mark Suters has kindly offered to transcribe episodes in his spare time, so if you go to crusadespod.com you will find links to the transcripts to some of the later episodes next to the episode link. We will continue to add them as they come through. I would like to extend many many thanks to Mark for doing this. It's been on my to-do list for many years, but I've never managed to get around to it, so thank you so much Mark.

Right, well, as we leave the Baltic Crusades with the arrival of the Black Death and mass casualties from the Battle on the Strebe, I will try to depart on a more cheery note by wishing you all a fabulous end to the year 2018, and an excellent start to the year 2019. And for all of you to whom Christmas is a thing, I hope you have a very happy one. Until February 2019, bye for now.

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