

History of the Crusades. Episode 294. The Baltic Crusades. The Samogitian Crusade Part XXVI. Samogitian Revolt.

Hello again. Last week we reached a watershed moment in the Baltic Crusades with Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, and Konrad von Jungingen, the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, signing a peace treaty at Sallinwerder in September of 1398.

In fact, the treaty signed at Sallinwerder went further than your average peace treaty and actually formed the basis of a military alliance between Lithuania and the Teutonic Order. For the Teutonic Order, the treaty meant that Samogitia was now theirs: all they had to do was move in and convert the pesky pagan Samogitians to the Christian faith. For Vytautas, the treaty meant that he could shift his focus to his latest project, a bid to oust the current Russian Khan and replace him with his own vassal.

Really, for all intents and purposes, this should have been the end of the Baltic Crusades. After all, everyone in the Baltic region has now been Christianized except for the Samogitians, and with Samogitia now officially under the control of the Teutonic Order, there is nothing stopping the Teutonic Order from moving in and Christianizing the Samogitians as well, a process which was already underway. So, really, as far as Crusading was concerned, everyone should be packing up and heading home.

Likewise, we should be placing the final touches on our Baltic Crusades series, but not packing up and going home, but instead packing up, then heading over to Spain. Because for all of those of you who have been asking: Yes. After the Baltic Crusades, we will be commencing a rather lengthy series on the rise of Andalusia and the Spanish Reconquista. But not so fast. While the Treaty of Sallinwerder should have spelled the end of the Baltic Crusades, it didn't. The reason why it didn't was primarily due to two totally unrelated events, which occurred far away from the shores, forests and swamps of Samogitia.

The first of these events was Vytautas totally face-planting in Russia. Now, Vytautas was a talented fighter and military commander who had spent a great deal of time, effort and money preparing for his attack on the Khan. He ended up managing to gather an absolutely massive army. In his book "The Samogitian Crusade", William Urban describes how the army consisted of 100 knights from Prussia, 12 Knights from the Teutonic Order and 400 Knights from Poland. All of these Knights, of course, would have brought their own men-at-arms with them on the campaign. In addition, more than 50 Russian and Lithuanian noblemen came along with their fighting forces and a whole bunch of Tartar fighters also joined, under the leadership of the recently deposed Khan Tokhtamysh.

You might remember from last week's episode that Tokhtamysh had fled to Lithuania after being deposed by the Great Khan Tamerlane, and that Vytautas had agreed to assist him to regain his title, so long as he ruled as a vassal of Vytautas. Now there are conflicting estimates as to exactly how big this fighting force was, but everyone agrees that it was absolutely massive. In the words of William Urban, and I quote "How large the force was is a matter of conjecture, but it must have been the most formidable army raised for centuries." End quote. Of course, an absolutely humongous army sounds like a very good thing, but humongous armies come with their own unique set of problems. Firstly, the feeding of the housing of and the asserting of discipline over a massive amount of people can be a logistical and human resources nightmare, and Vytautas' army had the added

problem of being composed of people who didn't share a common language, and who's fighting techniques and customs often differed quite markedly.

But all these difficulties were only of a small concern as they set out on the road towards the Russian steppe. Why? Well, because if Vytautas could achieve his objective, and Vytautas was confident that with this huge army under his command he could do exactly that, the consequences would be mind-boggling. Basically, it would mean that the Tartars would be driven out of the Western steppes and Latin Christian influence would spread deep into Russia, pushing back both on the Russian Orthodox religion and the encroaching Turkish threat. If all the Russian Principalities could be united under Vytautas' rule, then the whole geopolitical scene in the Baltic region and in eastern and central Europe would be permanently altered, and everyone, from the Teutonic Order to the Polish, Lithuanian and Russian nobleman who were fighting alongside Vytautas, wanted some serious skin in this game.

Unfortunately though, the predominantly European fighters were not familiar with the battle tactics used by the Tartars, and those who were familiar with those tactics, Tokhtamysh and his fighters, likely encountered language barriers in communicating with other units inside the army. Remember back in our episodes on the Middle Eastern Crusades when the forces opposing the Latin Christian Crusaders repeatedly used the feigned retreat battle tactic against the Crusaders, and remember that it kept succeeding over and over again? Well, it seemed that the Tartar fighters were also using the feigned retreat strategy, and it was still working.

For those of you who can't remember, the feigned retreat occurs when a small group of fighters takes on a larger force, then appears to lose and fall back before fleeing altogether. Their opponents can't help themselves, and time after time they make the mistake of chasing after the retreaters, who are not actually retreating at all but are leading the opposing army into a trap. The chasing army, all dishevelled and out of their battle lines, suddenly find themselves facing a large, well-organized army who has chosen its fighting ground carefully, and things usually go rapidly downhill for the chasers from then on.

Well, crazy as it seems, this is pretty much exactly what happened to Vytautas' army. The army had scattered and broken ranks to chase a small force of apparently retreating Tartars. Everyone joined in the chase, which was very enjoyable until they ran into a hail of arrow-fire from a well organized Tartar army, which just happened to be positioned exactly where the retreaters were retreating to. In the confusion which followed, the remainder of the Tartar army circled around behind Vytautas' army and blocked its retreat.

Thousands of fighters lost their lives at the hands of the Tartars. Amongst the survivors were Vytautas himself and one of his brothers, two Teutonic Knights, and a nobleman named Marquard von Salzbach. Amongst the dead were the core of Vytautas' best fighting men, the Grand Master's prized diplomats, and two of Jogaila's brothers. The battle, which incidentally is called the Battle on the Vorskla, ended Vytautas' dreams of expanding his territory into the Russian steppe region. The humiliating event had him limping back to Jogaila and swearing fealty to him, and from that time onwards Vytautas turned his back on the Russian principalities, concentrating instead on matters closer to home.

What this unmitigated disaster meant for the Teutonic Order was that they lost a lot of men, and as a result the Order found itself thinly spread across its areas of responsibility.

It needed a presence in the Holy Roman Empire and it was also firmly established in Livonia and Prussia. But now, just when it was required to also spread itself over Samogitia, it found itself short of manpower.

The second, unrelated, faraway event which occurred and affected the future of Samogitia, was the death in childbirth of Queen Jadwiga of Poland. The couple's infant daughter also died, leaving Jogaila ruling alone as the sole monarch of Poland. Always savvy about successfully securing his position, Jogaila was careful to make no significant changes to the policies previously put forward by Jadwiga, as he didn't want to rock the boat, alarm the Polish nobility and perhaps spark a Piast uprising against his rule. Jogaila didn't in the end rock the boat and he successfully ruled as King of Poland in his own right. However, one break with tradition which he did manage to pull off was that he failed to continue Jadwiga's close relationship with the Teutonic Order. Jogaila was careful to remain on peaceful terms with the Order, but he ceased all military cooperation with the Teutonic Order.

It was for these two reasons that Samogitia wasn't really successfully brought under the Teutonic thumb. On paper things looked fine. The Samogitians attempted to make clear their objections about the Treaty of Sallinwerder, but a winter campaign led by some of the survivors of the Battle on the Vorskla, Vytautas and the Marquard von Salzbach, along with the Dukes of Geldern and Lorraine, and some Teutonic forces led by the Order's Marshall, convinced the Samogitians to offer their unconditional surrender. They attempted to surrender to Vytautas, but Vytautas hand-balled them over to the Marshall. The Marshall then obtained a number of hostages from the Samogitians whom he marched back to Prussia.

What followed should have been the complete subjugation of Samogitia by the Order, but that didn't happen. You would have thought that the Grand Master would have ordered a raft of castles to be constructed across Samogitia to enable the Order to assert authority over the Samogitian people. You would have thought that tax collectors would have been sent out across Samogitia, and that administrators would have moved in to enact the economic reforms necessary to bring Samogitia under the umbrella of the Prussian economy and the Prussian system of government, but this didn't happen either. So the upshot was, although the Crusade against the Samogitians was officially over and the Samogitians had officially surrendered, they were just sort of left alone to get on with things by themselves. Fortunately for the residents of Kurland, Semigallia, Samland and Livonia, which over the years had to fend off frequent raids by the Samogitians, this didn't happen anymore. The Samogitians now tended to stay inside Samogitia.

But many of them weren't happy about being under the Teutonic thumb. As such, resistance to Teutonic rule began to fester and spread, and if you think that rebellions will frequently be breaking out, you would be exactly right. So although the Samogitian Crusade is over, the era of the Samogitian revolts is about to kick off, and you probably won't be too surprised to learn that, although most crusading expeditions have now come to an end (in fact, the new terror on the horizon for the Latin Christians of Europe are the Turks, so Crusading in the Baltic region is now pretty much at an end), conflict will continue to simmer between the most powerful entities in the region, those players being the King of Poland Jogaila, the Grand Duke of Lithuania Vytautas, and the men from the Teutonic Order.

So we've still got some ground to cover. As such, I will be continuing to follow events until the Battle of Tannenberg in 1410 and some way beyond that, until we wrap up and head off to our next adventure in Spain. After some debate with myself, I will group this final series of episodes on the Baltic Crusades under the heading of "The Lithuanian Conflict", which isn't strictly correct, as the conflict extends across into Poland and Samogitia, but it will have to do.

Next week though, we will be popping back over to Livonia for a short time to wrap up the Livonian Crusade. You may have noticed that we have neglected Livonia shamefully, as we've been focusing on events in Lithuania and Samogitia for quite a while. But there's not a huge amount to catch up on, and we should be able to conclude the Livonian Crusade in a single episode. Then we will start on the Lithuanian Conflict, which will take us up to the Battle of Tannenberg and beyond. Then I will take a short break. Then we're off to Spain. Everyone clear on the path forward from here on in? Good.

Now, before we wrap up for this week, I want to do something which I can't recall having done before, which is to recommend a work of historical fiction. I'm not a huge fan of historical fiction, as I think it's extremely difficult to effectively place a modern reader into a previous timeline without the author getting quite a bit wrong. I found it frequently to be the case that if the author concentrates on getting the history right, that often comes at the expense of a good story, and vice versa. But I'm pleased to report that I think I've found an exception. I accidentally stumbled across Henryk Sienkiewicz's masterpiece "The Teutonic Knights" when I purchased it from an online second-hand bookstore. I didn't realize it was a work of fiction - I actually bought it when I was purchasing my reading material at the start of this series thinking it was a non fiction book, but since it arrived at my door and I was its new owner, I thought I'd give it a read, and I'm glad I did. It's really, really good, and kind of gives you an insight as to what it would have been like living in the forests of Poland during the latter years of the Baltic Crusades. The novel opens pretty much on the timeline where we are at at the moment, in the year 1399, and it ends in 1410. A word of warning, though, the book was written in the year 1900, can be a bit heavy-going at times. Apparently some of the earlier English translations were a bit dodgy. Mine is a 1993 translation by Alicia Tyszkiewicz, which I can heartily vouch for, although you might need to note that she uses the Polish version of a lot of Lithuanian names: she calls Vytautas "Witold" and Jogaila is "Jagiello". But it's excellent, and I highly recommend getting your hands on a copy. It's considered a masterpiece of Polish literature, and its author won the Nobel Prize for literature in the year 1916, so he knows how to write. As the introduction to my edition states, and I quote "It is a rousing adventure of epic proportions whose images will remain with the reader through the years. They don't write them like this anymore." End quote. So do yourself a favor and get yourself a copy, if you can. Again, it's "The Teutonic Knights" by Henryk Sienkiewicz. Until next week, bye for now.

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