

History of the Crusades. Episode 297. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part II. Rebellion and War.

Hello again. Last week we followed the Teutonic Order to the island of Gotland, where the Order attacked, not a bunch of pagans but a bunch of pirates, the Victuals Brethren, who had taken over the island. That was all very fabulous and I guess everyone had a good time, but instead of looking outwards, beyond its shores, the Teutonic Order should have been focusing more attention on what was going on in its own backyard, because by the time the calendar had clicked over into the early months of the year 1401 it became apparent that the Samogitians were revolting.

Now really, the Teutonic Order should have seen this coming. Yes, Samogitia was, on paper, defeated, and hostages had been taken from Samogitia to Prussia to ensure that the region stayed subdued, but the Order seems to have underestimated the degree to which the Samogitians hated being governed by a foreign power. The Order should have recalled that the Samogitians hated being ruled by Lithuania, and they should have realized that if Samogitia hated being ruled by Lithuania, then they were really, really going to hate being ruled by a bunch of Latin Christian Prussian Germans.

The Teutonic Order had been distracted by other events, and with its manpower at a low point following Vytautas' disastrous Russian campaign and with its regional ally Queen Jadwiga having recently died, I guess it's understandable that the Teutonic Order sort of patted Samogitia on its head, then turned around and forgot about it.

The Samogitian Revolt began in March of the year 1401 and by April, only a matter of weeks later it was widespread and seemingly unstoppable. The Samogitians seized the stronghold at Friedeburg, then took the members of the Teutonic garrison prisoner, intending to use them in a prisoner swap in exchange for some of the Samogitian hostages being held in Prussia. In his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", William Urban reports that the depth of the hatred of the Samogitians for their Teutonic overlords was revealed when, after word spread across Prussia that Samogitia was now in revolt and that the Samogitians had taken a number of Teutonic soldiers to exchange for the hostages, two Samogitian hostages who were being held at Thorn took their own lives, in a patriotic fashion, to save some Teutonic prisoners from having to be released, demonstrating in the process the depth of feeling against German rule.

The Samogitian revolt was not confined just to Samogitia. As the uprising gained momentum, the Samogitians pushed out of Samogitia into Lithuania, and actually ended up successfully taking the castle at Kaunas. The fact that the Samogitian rebellion had spilled across the

border into Lithuania, and the fact that the rebels had enjoyed a measure of success in Lithuania, made Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen raise his eyebrows a little. And the more he thought about it, the more he suspected that Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, may have played some sort of role in assisting the Samogitians to rise up against their Teutonic rulers.

Now the Teutonic Order and Lithuania had, of course, signed a comprehensive treaty at Sallinwerder back in the year 1398, but quite a bit of water had flowed under the bridge in the three years since the treaty had been signed. When Vytautas had signed the treaty, his relationship with Jogaila had been a touch troublesome, and he had needed the military might of the Teutonic Order behind him to launch his campaign in Russia. Of course, we all know that Vytautas' Russian campaign ended up being a total disaster, and now that that was behind him, and now that he had patched up his relationship with the King of Poland, it was true that Vytautas didn't really need his alliance with the Teutonic Order any more.

However, it was also likely true that Vytautas had nothing to do with the Samogitian uprisings. When Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen finally came out and accused Vytautas of aiding the Samogitians, Vytautas denied being involved in any way, and actually went so far as to offer military assistance to the Order to help them to quell the revolt. But the Grand Master wasn't convinced. The Grand Master didn't have any proof that Vytautas had been working with the Samogitians against the Order's interests, so he couldn't just publicly and loudly denounce Vytautas and turn his back on him. But that didn't prevent him from becoming deeply suspicious of Vytautas, to the extent that, really, he no longer trusted him. As William Urban States in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights" and I quote, "The Grand Master had to pretend to still trust the Grand Duke, but henceforth he chose to act alone." End quote.

In September of the year 1401, the Marshall of the Order led a small force of Teutonic fighters up the Nemunas River and managed to retake the fortress at Gotteswerder. He then proceeded up-river to Kaunas, where he found that the castle at Kaunas had been burnt to the ground, then abandoned. Towards the end of the year 1401, the Grand Master sent some men to assist Vytautas in an attack on Novgorod, a move which assisted the Livonian Chapter of the Order, but his suspicions about Vytautas did not dissipate. In January of the year 1402, the Grand Master decided that everyone would be much better off if Vytautas was no longer the Grand Duke of Lithuania, and he began quietly preparing the Teutonic forces to once again go to war with Lithuania.

Now, before he unleashes the might of the Teutonic Order against Lithuania, Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen needs to have a plan. Traditionally, the Teutonic Order's policy in

regards to Lithuania was that it would prefer Lithuania to be ruled by a Lithuanian who had the tick of approval from the Order, and would rule Lithuania, if not as a direct vassal of the Order, then at least with the interests of Prussia and the Order in mind. The Grand Master was of the view that Vytautas no longer fulfilled the Order's requirements in this area and that the Order needed to locate a more suitable Lithuanian to rule Lithuania, a person whom the Order could groom for the position, then assist to rise to replace Vytautas as Grand Duke. The man the Order settled upon for this role was one of Jogaila's brothers, Svitrigaila.

Svitrigaila was one of Jogaila's younger brothers, and we haven't come across him in the narrative yet because so far he has spent most of his life in the Russian Principalities. Importantly for the Teutonic Order, Svitrigaila was not particularly close to Jogaila, and he absolutely loathed Vytautas. He had been defeated in battle by Vytautas when he attempted to assert his authority over Vitebsk. He had been taken to Krakow in chains following his defeat, but he had managed to convince Jogaila to let him return to the Russian principalities. Following Skirgaila's death in Kiev in the year 1396, Svitrigaila declared himself to be Skirgaila's heir, then he proceeded to attempt to rule over Skirgaila's lands. This didn't work, and Svitrigaila ended up making his way back to Poland to see if he couldn't make a name for himself in Jogaila's royal court. However, Svitrigaila wasn't the sort of man who Jogaila particularly wanted hanging around. Svitrigaila was similar in personality to Skirgaila, but without Skirgaila's charisma. Like Skirgaila, Svitrigaila was ambitious, hotheaded, impulsive and brave in battle, but unlike Skirgaila, Svitrigaila wasn't particularly likable and seemed to make enemies rather easily.

While Svitrigaila was present in Jogaila's kingdom, Jogaila made the decision to marry once again, this time to a granddaughter of Casimir the Great, a young woman called Anna of Celje. However, when Svitrigaila heard that Vytautas had been invited to the wedding, Svitrigaila refused to attend. In fact, as William Urban reports in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", the wedding ended up being a disappointment all around. Anna had not spent much time with her new husband at all, before deciding that he was an unattractive old bloke who was only interested in boring things like warfare and politics. Jogaila hadn't spent much time at all with his new young wife Anna, before deciding that she was an unattractive, hare-brained, superficial sort of a person who was illiterate, politically uninterested and couldn't even speak Polish. I guess the 30 year age gap between the newly married couple didn't help, but it seems that there was widespread disappointment all around.

Anyway, while Jogaila was distracted by his wedding and the inappropriateness of his chosen bride, Svitrigaila slipped out of the Kingdom of Poland and, disguised as a merchant, made his way to Prussia, where he offered his services to Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen. In return for supporting him to overthrow Vytautas, regain his lands in the southern Russian Principalities, and become the new Grand Duke of Lithuania, Svitrigaila promised to lend

military support to the Order and agreed to stay well out of Samogitian politics. Svitrigaila ratified the Treaty of Sallinwerder and agreed to abide by its terms.

Then the Grand Master unleashed the might of the Teutonic Order against Lithuania, invading it without warning from two directions in March of the year 1402. The Grand Master declared that the Teutonic Order recognized Svitrigaila, not Vytautas, as the true Grand Duke of Lithuania. And he crossed his fingers that the noble families inside Lithuania would begin to gravitate towards Svitrigaila and that eventually Svitrigaila would win enough support to overthrow Vytautas and rule in his own right.

Now, I'm guessing, the question you are all asking yourselves is "Why did Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen think that influential Lithuanians would suddenly abandon Vytautas and back the Teutonic Order's new favorite, Svitrigaila"? Well, Vytautas was actually coming down from another loss in the Russian Principalities. He had captured the city of Smolensk, but it had revolted in August of 1401, and the governor of the city and many of its Lithuanian garrison members had been killed in the uprising. Vytautas had returned to the city and laid siege to it, but when the plague broke out inside the besieged town, then started spreading to the Lithuanian besiegers, Vytautas had been forced to withdraw. Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen saw Vytautas' failure to take Smolensk as a weak-link in his ruling authority and hoped to leverage this weakness by breaking the chain entirely, and getting the Lithuanian people to throw their support behind Svitrigaila.

Now, the two-pronged attack on Lithuania was designed to leave Vytautas scrambling to oppose the invasion. The Grand Master ordered the Livonian Chapter of the Order to launch an attack into Lithuania from Dunaberg Castle, while the Prussian Chapter of the Order attacked Lithuania via the Nemunas River. Vytautas responded by leaving the local Lithuanians to oppose the Order's invasions, while Vytautas himself went on the offensive, ravaging the area around the Order's vital stronghold at Memel, then launching a successful attack on the castle at Gotteswerder in Samogitia.

Now, for the Grand Master, this whole plan ended up backfiring spectacularly. Instead of meeting Vytautas on the battlefield and vanquishing him, the people who marched out to oppose the Teutonic invasions were the local Lithuanians, the same people whose support the Grand Master was hoping to garner. While the Teutonic Order and its getting-less-popular-with-the-locals-by-the-minute potential new Grand Duke floundered around in Lithuania, Vytautas scored a number of embarrassing victories against Teutonic possessions outside Lithuania. So, in one dramatic gesture Grand Master Konrad von Jungingen has completely burned his bridges with his former ally Vytautas, has made an enemy of Lithuania, and possibly of its paired nation Poland, and has taken a number of hits against its own

strategic strongholds in the Baltic region. Oh, and it's also pretty much destroyed any chance of Svitrigaila, ever gaining enough support from his Lithuanian countrymen to have a decent crack of taking the Lithuanian leadership. Oops.

And the hits to both sides were only just getting started. The war between Lithuania and the Teutonic Order continued into the year 1403, with both sides enduring devastating losses. Vytautas managed to successfully reach out to Svitrigaila towards the end of the year 1402, and convinced him to disentangle himself from his alliance with the Teutonic Order. Svitrigaila then agreed to take himself well out of the picture, and he ended up traveling to what is now modern day Ukraine and settling down on some land there.

But because Vytautas' strategy was to remain outside Lithuania and to strike back at the Teutonic Order while they were occupied in Lithuania, Lithuania itself was dealt some exceedingly harsh blows. In his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", William Urban describes how, by the end of the year 1402, the Teutonic Order was running rampant across the Lithuanian highlands, with the locals struggling to push back against it. Major castles were destroyed at Trakai and Gardinas, and the Teutonic Knights set fire to fields of fodder and grain, denying to the local Lithuanians food which was meant to feed them and their animals over the coming winter. When the Teutonic fighters finally retreated out of Lithuania, exiting at Kaunas then traveling down the Nemunas River, they took with them 72 Lithuanian noblemen and 3,000 Lithuanian prisoners.

Meanwhile, Vytautas had scored some major hits against the Order. He managed to take the vital strategic stronghold of Dunaberg Castle in the upper reaches of the Daugava River in Livonia. He then traveled to Samogitia and worked his way down the Nemunas River, capturing Georgenburg Castle, and was only stopped once he arrived at Ragnit Castle, where a bunch of crusaders from Central Europe had hastily gathered, along with the Marshall of the Teutonic Order, to oppose his advance.

In the summer of the year 1403 both sides met for peace talks. While prisoners were exchanged between the two sides, the talks eventually broke down. Talks resumed in September, but again no result was achieved. It wasn't until the spring of the following year, in May of 1404, that a breakthrough occurred, mainly due to the intervention of Jogaila the King of Poland, who assisted the Grand Master and the Grand Duke of Lithuania to reach an agreement.

We shall discuss the peace agreement and the fate of the Samogitian revolt next week, as we continue to examine the three-way tussle between Poland, Lithuania and the Teutonic Order in the buildup to the epic battle of Tannenberg. Until next week, bye for now.

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