

History of the Crusades. Episode 299. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part IV - Tensions Rise.

Hello again. Last week we saw some testing times for Jogaila the King of Poland, Vytautas the Grand Duke of Lithuania, and the Teutonic Order. While the situation in Samogitia looked like it had settled down for the time being, Vytautas had once again encountered difficulties attempting to extend his influence in the Russian Principalities and the respected Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, Konrad von Jungingen, had died, leaving his younger brother Ulrich to take up the mantle of Grand Master of the Order.

Now I'm not sure whether Ulrich was pleased about his elevation from the position of Marshall to the position of Grand Master, but he'd better buckle in because a bunch of serious crises are about to head his way, from a variety of directions, and he will be left struggling attempting to deal with them all.

The first crisis began in the Russian Principalities, with the rather startling news that Svitrigaila had decided to travel to Moscow to give his support to Basil I. Remember Svitrigaila? He was one of Jogaila's younger brothers, who briefly became the Teutonic Order's favored man to replace Vytautas as Grand Duke of Lithuania. Well, Svitrigaila has now launched himself back into the world of political intrigue with a plan he hatched after sharing a prison cell with the Duke of Starodub. Like Svitrigaila, the Duke of Starodub was no fan of Vytautas'. In fact, he had plotted to have him kidnapped, which was why he was currently in jail.

The two jailbirds spent their captive days figuring out how best to deal Vytautas as bigger blow as possible, and by the time they were both released, they had come up with a plan. Their plan was to use their influence to convince a bunch of noblemen from across Lithuania and Samogitia to defect to Moscow and throw their support behind Basil. Their scheme ended up being a resounding success, and to show the extent of his gratitude, Basil granted Svitrigaila a huge portion of land to rule in the Grand duchy of Moscow. The region granted to Svitrigaila was so large in fact, that William Urban reports in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights" that it amounted to about half of all the territory within Moscow.

Vytautas, as you might imagine, was rather unimpressed by this turn of events. He was so unimpressed, in fact, that he decided to invade Moscow with a force of Lithuanian, Polish and Teutonic fighters.

Now the political situation in the Russian Principalities, which was complicated to start with, has now become even more so. I should probably let you know that Basil is actually Vytautas' son-in-law, as one of Vytautas' daughters is Basil's wife. And you know how in last week's episode, the powerful Khan Edigu was supporting Basil behind the scenes? Well, that situation has now been reversed, and the fighting men of the Golden Horde are actually about to descend on Basil and give him a good hiding. But we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves.

Vytautas, with the support of the Teutonic Order and Jogaila the King of Poland, is now heading towards Moscow, hoping to give both Basil and Svitrigaila hidings of their own. But it wasn't to be. Moscow is a vast distance from Lithuania if you are riding there on horseback, and it ended up being just too much for everyone involved. As a chronicler from the Teutonic Order reported at the time, and I quote "In this year in the summer,

Vytold [that is Vytautas], made a great expedition against the King of Moscow and our Lords sent many knights with him, and the King of Poland a huge force, and with them went many princes, counts, knights and soldiers. They went an immense distance towards the said King, but they accomplished nothing and had to retreat to safety. On the return, the vast distances and poor roads wore out the horses. When they could no longer carry the weapons, they threw some into deep water, burned others and buried others and thus, having left horses and weapons behind, they were barely able to escape by foot." End quote.

So once again, Vytautas has failed to achieve his objectives in the Russian Principalities. But just over a year later, Moscow will be attacked by the Golden Horde, and the combined forces of Basil and Svitrigaila will struggle to push back against the Tartar armies. In fact, they will struggle so much that the experience will prompt Svitrigaila to switch sides once again and go cap-in-hand back to Lithuania, swearing his undying loyalty to Vytautas.

I guess it won't surprise anyone to learn that Svitrigaila's newfound dedication to Vytautas won't last terribly long. When only a year or so had passed, Vytautas discovered that Svitrigaila had been secretly corresponding by letter with the Grand Master, so he decided to throw Svitrigaila into a Lithuanian prison, and he will remain there for the next nine years.

Now, while, Vytautas had no luck whatsoever against Moscow, he did end up enjoying some success against Pskov. Joining forces with Master Konrad von Vietinghof of Livonia, the Lithuanians raided Pskov repeatedly until in February of 1409 they finally met with success. With Basil of Moscow unable to come to Pskov's aid due to his continuing Tartar problems, the people of Pskov agreed to accept a ruler appointed by Vytautas. By the end of all of these Russian escapades, the political situation within the Russian Principalities was still pretty chaotic and pretty fluid, and the imprisonment of Svitrigaila had poured cold water over the relationship between Vytautas and Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen.

Yet the cooling of his relationship with Lithuania was the least of the Grand Master's problems at this time. The main issue keeping Grand Master Ulrich awake at night was, you guessed it, the Samogitians. The man tasked by the Teutonic Order with administering Samogitia, and bringing it under the Teutonic wing, a man called Michael Kuchmeister, had been doing a pretty good job of converting the Samogitian economy under trying conditions, the trying conditions being that most of the Samogitians were totally unhappy about the entire arrangement.

However, the Grand Master had been taking a keen personal interest in the transformation of Samogitia, and as a result, had sort of started to interfere in the governing of the region. One example of this occurred when a contingent of Samogitian noblemen arrived in Marienburg in the year 1407 and had met with the Grand Master. The Grand Master had urged them to accept being governed by Prussian law and to embrace the new agricultural reforms. However, the noblemen pleaded that they couldn't pay the higher taxes that were levied under this system, so Grand Master Ulrich decided to fix this problem by excusing the Samogitian noblemen from any obligation to pay taxes for the next three years. However, all the rest of the Samogitians, of course, weren't caught under this provision, so the burden of taxation in Samogitia fell disproportionately upon the poorer peasant classes, and not surprisingly this was causing a great deal of discontent.

As William Urban points out in his book “The Livonian Crusade”, the risk of another Samogitian uprising wouldn't have concerned the Teutonic Order unduly at this stage, so long as they were absolutely sure that the Samogitians would not be able to call on Lithuania for support. But unfortunately for Grand Master Ulrich, just when he needed the alliance between himself and Vytautas to be rock solid, the relationship was in fact heading in the opposite direction, as we've just discussed. It had actually been very convenient for the Grand Master to have Vytautas expend so much time and energy in the Russian Principalities. If Lithuanian interests and concerns were all focused on Russia, then the Grand Master could rest assured that Vytautas wasn't quietly conspiring with the noble families in Samogitia to encourage another uprising, or working with Poland against the Order's interests in the territories claimed by the Kingdom of Poland in the Prussian borderlands. So the Grand Master was likely a little concerned to discover Vytautas entering into formal peace arrangements with Basil of Moscow.

With his eyes now firmly closer to home, and not in the Russian Principalities, Vytautas began to concentrate on the politics of Samogitia, Prussia and Poland. And the Grand Master's concerns would have been raised a few more notches when he was informed that Vytautas personally ventured into Samogitia in the winter of 1409, then returned there twice in the following spring.

If the relationship between the Order and Vytautas is beginning to make Grand Master Ulrich a little nervous, how is his relationship with Jogaila at this time? Well, I guess I don't need to tell you that Jogaila is an extremely talented political operator, and I imagine you won't be at all surprised to learn that Jogaila has been observing the way in which the Order had previously kept Vytautas onside by assisting his forays into the Russian Principalities, and how this relationship seemed to sour a little after Vytautas imprisoned Svitrigaila, after discovering his correspondence with the Grand Master, and how now Grand Master Ulrich is nervously chewing his fingernails as he watches Vytautas renew his ties to the Samogitians.

Jogaila, as the King of Poland, has a number of interests he would like to advance at this point in time. He has been continually pestering Grand Master Ulrich to hand over land in the contested Prussian borderlands, and now he decided to also take up the patriotic Polish position that the region of Pomerelia rightfully belonged not to Prussia but to Poland. Jogaila was mindful of the fact that Vytautas had no heirs, and it was always in the back of Jogaila's mind that if he supported Lithuanian expansionism, for instance, if he supported Vytautas' claims to Samogitia, or his forays into the Russian Principalities, that this may lead to some major pay-dirt later down the track, should Jogaila inherit Vytautas' lands after Vytautas' death. So Jogaila set about encouraging Vytautas' regional ambitions, while simultaneously ramping up opposition to the Teutonic Order in Pomerelia and in the contested borderlands. In an effort to distract the Teutonic Order, Jogaila called on the Pope to support the Livonian Chapter of the Order to commence a Crusade to Novgorod, and he also encouraged the Teutonic Order to take its military order activities even further afield, to confront Europe's latest threat, the Turks. So Jogaila at this time was, in effect, doing his best to weaken Prussia while simultaneously keeping a keen eye on opportunities for Polish and Lithuanian expansionism.

You may be interested to learn that the three main players, Grand Master Ulrich, Jogaila, and Vytautas then met in Kaunas for a public display of unity. There was feasting and there were public festivities and pageants, but the celebrations couldn't quite mask the fact

that rifts in the relationships between the three men were beginning to appear, and that cracks were especially evident between Lithuania and the Teutonic Order.

In fact, not long after the public high-fiving at Kaunas, Grand Master Ulrich decided that he better begin preparing for war. Now you might think that this was a bit of an over-reaction on the Grand Master's part, but he knew that discontent inside Samogitia about the taxation situation was rising, and that once the three year tax exemption period for the Samogitian noblemen expired, with Vytautas' assistance Samogitia may once again rise in rebellion. If this was going to occur, then the Grand Master figured that he needed to start preparing for it now.

The Teutonic Order's resources had been spread rather thinly in recent times, with the campaigns in Russia, and the maintenance of the Teutonic outpost on Gotland had also been placing a strain on the Order's resources. Solving the Gotland problem proved to be easy. Sending vast amounts of resources all the way over to Gotland to maintain it as a Teutonic possession had been proving increasingly unpopular of late, and really the island had outlived its strategic benefit to the Order. So in June of 1408, Grand Master Ulrich sold Gotland to Queen Margaret of Denmark, who purchased the island from the Order on the promise that she would do her best to prevent the island from reverting to a base for pirates.

Then, for the rest of 1408 and throughout the year 1409, Grand Master Ulrich concentrated on strengthening the Order's strongholds across Samogitia. This ended up being a huge undertaking. Deciding to abandon the Order's latest construction at Neu Konigsberg, the Grand Master instead ordered two new strongholds to be built, at Friedeberg and Tilsit, which was near Ragnit. He then strengthened and expanded the stronghold at Memel, and then poured his energies into totally overhauling the defenses at Ragnit. All the remains of the old earthen and wooden castle at Ragnit were pulled down, and stone was hauled in all the way from Prussia, so that a splendid new brick and stone fortress could be built on the site. When the work was completed, the stronghold at Ragnit was by far the finest Teutonic structure outside Prussia, and Grand Master Ulrich may have felt confident that these new infrastructure works would keep the Samogitians in line, no matter what transpired in the future.

Now, historians pretty much agree that Grand Master Ulrich's decisions to offload Gotland and strengthen the Order's defenses in Samogitia were both sound, wise policies. However, the next move the Grand Master made in an attempt to prepare for war in the region was neither wise nor sound. In fact, the move he made to try to prevent a regional war actually ended up causing the war which the Teutonic Order was so desperately trying to prevent.

Join me next week as Grand Master Ulrich's epic blunder sets the scene for a military showdown between the Teutonic Order, Poland and Lithuania, a showdown which will end in a battle near the village of Tannenberg in East Prussia. Until next week, bye for now.

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