

History of the Crusades. Episode 303. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part VIII. The Battle of Tannenberg, Part 2.

Hello again. Last week we saw a 30,000 strong combined Lithuanian and Polish army crossed the Vistula River and make its way northwards towards Marienburg. Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen's 20,000 strong Teutonic army is currently stationed at various positions around both east and west Prussia, ready to race in to oppose the Polish-Lithuanian invasion. In an attempt to confuse and bewilder the Teutonic scouts, King Jogaila of Poland has ordered the invading army to avoid marching in formation along roads or cleared areas, and instead is driving them northwards in a scattered, haphazard manner, using tracks instead of roads, and moving through forests instead of fields.

Now, in order to reach his destination, the town of Marienburg, Jogaila knew that his forces would need to cross the Drweca River, an obstacle that inconveniently lay blocking the route between his army and the town of Marienburg. As soon as the Grand Master's scouts reported that the Polish-Lithuanian army was haphazardly making its way northwards, Grand Master Ulrich realized this fact as well, so Ulrich ordered all the Teutonic forces stationed in the region to race to the northern banks of the Drweca River, to meet at the ford which was usually utilized as a crossing point. So both armies are now headed for the same spot, the crossing point on the river, with the invading army approaching from the south and the Teutonic forces moving down from the north.

Now both armies at this point in time are enjoying particular advantages. The Teutonic armies are marching on home soil, so the men in the Teutonic forces have the advantage of knowing the layout of the land. They know where best to gather food and supplies, and they have the support of the local people. The Polish and Lithuanian forces, while not knowing the area as intimately as the Prussian armies, are comfortable moving through the forests and swamps, and, at least in their current location, which was not far from the Polish border, there were enough local people who spoke Polish to assist the invaders to locate the fording point on the river and to provide useful local knowledge.

It's worth pointing out at this stage that neither of the armies had any recent experience of engaging in a pitched battle against their opponents. The Teutonic forces hadn't clashed in a major battle against the Lithuanians since the year 1370, and the Teutonic forces hadn't met the Polish forces on the battlefield since the year 1332. So, as it became more and more likely that a major pitched battle was looming between the two forces, neither side had any real experience to draw upon as to how the battle was likely to pan out.

Anyway, by the time the Polish-Lithuanian army reached the fording point on the Drweca River, the Teutonic forces had already stationed themselves on the other side of the river and had constructed a log barrier at the crossing point, making it impossible for the Polish and Lithuanian horsemen to cross. So Jogaila was faced with a choice. He could either withdraw, or head up-river to the east to try to locate another crossing point. Of course, withdrawal was out of the question, so Jogaila made the decision to head upstream.

Now this posed some problems. As William Urban points out in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", the further east you traveled up the river from the fording point, the less wilderness there was. Forests started to be replaced by cleared fields, and numerous villages were located on the river, around which the large army would need to navigate. This meant that the ability of the army to move through dense forests and swamps would no longer be working in its favor, and the lack of local knowledge may

prove to be a disadvantage for the army as it tried to navigate the roads and tracks between the riverside villages.

To complicate matters further, the Polish speaking locals who had been willing so far to assist Jogaila's army had become terrified of the Tartar fighters who were traveling with the Lithuanian forces. The Tartars would regularly select local women to rape and murder, and tended to randomly slaughter people they came across, including the Polish speakers who were assisting the invading forces. Jogaila did his best to discipline the unruly Tartars, but was finding it hard to keep them in line, and was likely mightily relieved when some Lithuanian scouts reported that they had discovered the road which led to the town of Osterode.

Now the town of Osterode was located to the north-east of their current position and was on the banks of the Drweca River. However, a part of the river near Osterode was pleasingly narrow. As such, if the attackers could make their way to Osterode, crossing the river would no longer pose a major problem, as it would be narrow enough to cross without too much drama. As an added bonus, Marienburg could be reached by proceeding to the north-west, past Osterode. So Jogaila decided that the new plan was to abandon the idea of crossing the Drweca River at this point in time, and instead to head as quickly as they could to Osterode, keeping the Teutonic forces safely on the opposite side of the Drweca for as long as possible.

Jogaila met with his war council to confirm the new strategy, and it was agreed that the following morning the army would pack up as quickly and discreetly as possible, then would retreat from the riverbank and start heading towards Osterode, before Grand Master Ulrich realized what was going on. To try to distract the Grand Master from observing the Polish and Lithuanian forces shifting camp on the other side of the river, Jogaila sent a herald over to the Teutonic position, requesting a meeting to discuss a possible peaceful solution to the looming conflict. Jogaila's herald relayed the message to the Grand Master, who then called a meeting with his leadership team to discuss the proposal. The leadership team agreed to send a message over to the Polish camp rejecting Jogaila's offer to commence peace talks, but by the time the messenger reached the camp, he found it abandoned, the Lithuanian and Polish army having achieved its objective of packing up and leaving without drawing attention to themselves.

The Grand Master immediately ordered a pontoon bridge to be placed across the river, to enable the Teutonic army to race across and pursue the Polish and Lithuanian fighters. But when his scouts advised him that the army seemed to be moving to the northeast, Grand Master Ulrich scrapped this plan, deciding that instead of chasing after the army, he would be better placed if he could get ahead of the invaders. then block their progress. So the Grand Master ordered his army to hit the road, literally. While Jogaila's army was moving slowly, sticking to the forests as much as it could and avoiding roads and fields, the Prussian force did the opposite, using roads and cleared ground to its advantage, covering as much ground as it could, moving eastwards to get ahead of Jogaila's army and cut it off.

Now, Jogaila had split his army into two columns, which marched parallel to each other, one column being comprised of the Polish forces and the other of the Lithuanian forces. As William Urban reports in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", Jogaila eventually brought the two separate columns of his army together in a position between two villages, those villages being the village of Tannenberg and the village of Grunwald.

Now, I'm just going to pause here for a moment to talk a little bit about recent developments around the history of the Battle of Tannenberg. The events which occurred at that battle hold a special place in the histories of the Polish people, the Lithuanian people, and the German people, so accounts of the battle have been told and retold countless times over the centuries. Recently, though, there has been a major shift in how the battle has been recounted, primarily due to concerns raised about the accuracy of one of the chroniclers of the event, a man called Jan Dlugosz, who wasn't a witness to the events but nonetheless provided a passionate anti-German, pro-Polish and anti-Lithuanian interpretation of the battle. As William Urban points out, a Swedish historian, Sven Ekdahl, raised concerns about the Chronicle back in the 1980s, and after twenty years of diligent research, debate, and historical detective work, it is now widely accepted that less weight should be placed on the chronicle of Jan Dlugosz than had traditionally been the case. This development, along with archaeologists' discoveries with the assistance of metal detectors, as recently as 2015, have now placed the battlefield to the south and east of the village of Grunwald, instead of to the south and east of the village of Tannenberg, which had traditionally thought to have been the location of the main battle.

And you might be interested to know that in the year 2010, For the 600th anniversary of the battle, a massive reenactment was staged, and when I say massive, I mean massive. Over 2,000 horsemen took part, along with nearly 4,000 other participants who played the part of soldiers, peasants and camp followers. More than 200,000 people watched the event, which was actually the largest ever re-enactment of a medieval battle. So there you go, the Battle of Tannenberg is still as alive as it ever was, more than 600 years after it took place.

So, how did the battle unfold? Well, as we just stated, Grand Master Ulrich's plan was to race ahead of the Polish-Lithuanian forces and block them before they could reach Osterode. The Grand Master was keen to keep the element of surprise on his side, but unfortunately, by the time the Teutonic scouts reported that the Polish-Lithuanian forces had been spotted camping in a forest near the villages of Tannenberg and Grunwald, a new day was just dawning, and the Teutonic forces had just completed a fifteen mile ride, in darkness, at speed, so everyone in the Teutonic army was exhausted and in no condition to launch themselves immediately into a surprise attack.

By this time, the Polish and Lithuanian scouts had also spotted the approaching Teutonic army, meaning it was too late for the Prussians to withdraw out of sight. So the Grand Master located a large field between the villages of Tannenberg and Grunwald, and ordered his men to line up and prepare their battle positions, which likely included digging trenches to slow a Polish-Lithuanian cavalry charge.

William Urban states that the Grand Master's plan at this stage was to remain in this position and wait for Jogaila's forces to initiate an attack. After repelling this attack, the Grand Master would then launch an effective counter strike against the Polish-Lithuanian forces. As the Polish and Lithuanian army was currently camped in a nearby forest, this would save the Prussian army from having to venture into the forests to launch its attack, so the Grand Master decided to stay out in the open in the field and wait for Jogaila to bring the fight to him.

Now the exact size of the armies at this point in time is still disputed amongst historians, but it's generally thought that the combined Polish-Lithuanian forces numbered around

20,000 to 25,000 men, while the Grand Master's force contained around 12,000 to 15,000. You might remember that initially the Grand Master's armies numbered around 20,000 men, but since they had been stationed across Prussia, only around 12,000 to 15,000 of these men had managed to make it to the Grand Master's side in time for the confrontation.

Now, according to a German chronicler, the Grand Master's army waited for three hours in their battle lines, while the Polish forces milled around in an unorganized fashion, staying close to the woods, engaging in minor skirmishes, but not lining up like they were supposed to and coming out to face the Germans. In the end, the Marshall of the Teutonic forces sent a couple of heralds over to the Polish camp to find out what was going on.

These heralds were dressed elegantly, bearing the arms of the Holy Roman Emperor and a Pomeranian Duke, and were holding an unsheathed sword each. The heralds were ordered to present one of the swords to King Jogaila and one to Grand Duke Vytautas. In German tradition, the presentation of an unsheathed sword to an opponent was meant to be an insult, and to make sure that the Polish and Lithuanian leaders realized the nature of the gift, the heralds were directed to accuse the opposing forces of hiding out in the woods, and in effect of being too timid to come out and face the Teutonic forces on the battlefield. The message was related by the heralds in German, then translated into Polish. King Jogaila then yelled back at the heralds in Polish, calling upon God, the Virgin Mary, and a bunch of Polish saints to assist him to give the Teutonic army the hiding it deserved.

Jogaila may not have fully understood the unsheathed sword insult though, as apparently he accepted both of the swords as gifts, and later had them placed in the treasury of one of his castles. William Urban reports that the swords were displayed during many coronation ceremonies of Polish Kings, but they both disappeared in the year 1853 after, and I quote, "being confiscated by czarist authorities looking for potential revolutionaries" end quote.

Anyway, even if the Grand Master had expected Jogaila to throw away the swords in disgust and not keep them for use in future Polish coronation ceremonies, the message delivered by the heralds had the desired effect. The Lithuanian and Polish forces began moving out of the woods, over to the field where the Teutonic forces were patiently waiting, and not long afterwards Jogaila gave the signal for the battle to begin.

Join me next week for the one, the only, the famous, Battle of Tannenberg. Until next week, bye for now.

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