

History of the Crusades. Episode 305. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part X. To Marienburg.

Hello again. Last week we ventured onto the battlefield for an epic showdown between the Teutonic Order and the Polish and Lithuanian invaders, a battle which has become known to history as the Battle of Tannenberg.

The battle was catastrophic for the Teutonic Order, which not only lost its Grand Master, Ulrich von Jungingen, most of the Knights who took part in the battle were either killed outright or suffered significant injuries. Among those lying dead on the battlefield with the Grand Master were the Marshall of the Order, the Grand Commander, and the Order's treasurer. In one fell swoop, the Battle of Tannenberg had pretty much wiped out the entire leadership structure of the Teutonic Order.

Now we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that the Battle of Tannenberg is just the first step in King Jogaila's plan to march to Marienburg. While the Teutonic Order has suffered almost unimaginable losses in its failed effort to block the progress of the combined Lithuanian and Polish armies, the invaders are still a long way from the town of Marienburg, and they are still deep inside enemy territory, in the Teutonic heartland of Prussia. So really, King Jogaila of Poland and Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania need to get their armies moving and on the march again, moving in a northwesterly direction, towards Marienburg.

But the men in the combined Polish Lithuanian army are absolutely exhausted. We need to remember that while the Teutonic losses were massive, the Polish and Lithuanian fighters also suffered heavy casualties, and many of the people on the battlefield that day fought to the point of exhaustion and beyond. So getting everyone to hit the road is really not a viable option at this point.

Also, since the Teutonic forces have been pretty much annihilated, and any German fighters or commanders who survived are keeping well clear of the victorious Polish and Lithuanian troops, it is pretty much up to the Polish and Lithuanian men to deal with the aftermath of the battle, which entails dispatching any seriously wounded fighters, removing anything worth keeping from the bodies of those who had fallen, then burying those bodies. It soon became apparent though, that this was a mammoth task. There were thousands and thousands of bodies to deal with. While there was probably no shortage of volunteers willing to remove valuable weapons, armor, money, and jewelry from the dead fighters, digging graves for them all was another matter entirely. After a few days, it became obvious that the bodies were decaying more rapidly than they could be buried, so to prevent disease from breaking out, it was decided to gather the dead into piles and burn them, which was a radical move considering the abhorrence the Latin Christians had for the pagan practices of cremating the dead.

The following year, a chapel was built on the battlefield. It was constructed of wood, but when it burned down a few years later, in the year 1414, it was replaced by a solid stone structure. William Urban reports in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights" that for many years it was believed that the chapel was constructed on the exact place where Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen met his end, but modern historians are now of the view that the site is actually where the Grand Master's tent had stood, near where a number of Teutonic fighters made their last stand, fighting around the supply carts in their camp. The chapel was a destination for pilgrims wishing to pay their respects to the fallen for many centuries, but now only the foundations of the chapel and the lower parts of its

walls remain. You can check them out on Google Earth if you are so inclined. The site of the battle is today in Poland, between the village of Stebark, which is spelt S T E B A R K, and the village of Grunwald. If you zoom in, you will see that a series of monuments, which are labeled as a "museum" on Google Earth, have been constructed on the site of the battlefield between Stebark and Grunwald, and the remains of the chapel are down a pathway which leads from the monuments towards Grunwald.

Now just a word of warning. There is another Battle of Tannenberg, which was fought between Russia and Germany in World War One, around 30 kilometers from the site of the 1410 battle. This was also a massive confrontation, which saw over 80,000 fighters killed or wounded, most of them Russians. So don't get your Tannenbergs muddled and end up in the wrong place.

Now, while the Polish and Lithuanian fighters and their horses were taking a much needed rest, while the bodies on the battlefield were being plundered and buried (Oh, and this is probably a good time to mention that Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen's body was taken to nearby Osterode to be buried and was at a later date taken to Marienburg to lie with his predecessors), and while the Tartar and some Lithuanian fighters were amusing themselves by raiding nearby villages, what were the Prussians doing?

Well, the Teutonic Order and the wider country of Prussia were both currently in collective states of disbelief and shock. The idea that the mighty, invincible, and all-conquering Teutonic Order could have been all but wiped out in a single battle was something that the Prussian people were struggling to get their heads around. There was also the related problem of the fact that a massive foreign army was in their country, and there was now no realistic way of defeating this army or forcing it to withdraw from Prussia. It seemed that the only sensible move the cities, towns and strongholds of Prussia could make at this point in time was to surrender to the King of Poland. As a result, representatives from cities and castles began making their way over to the invading army to offer their surrender. William Urban reports that even cities which contained garrisons or officers from the Teutonic Order, who were urging resistance to the invaders, decided to override their military men and wave the white flag. So the cities of nearby Osterode and further afield, Elbing, Thorn and Kulm, all expelled their own garrisons and declared themselves content to become Polish subjects, so long as Jogaila promised to guarantee their existing rights and privileges. Even the Bishops of Prussia - the Bishops of Ermland, Kulm, Pomesania, and Samland - acknowledged that they were now under Polish rule.

When Jogaila did manage to start moving his army northwards towards Marienburg, the progress of his march was slowed by a near-constant stream of representatives from nearby castles and villages, offering him their total surrender. Unsurprisingly, as he moved through the countryside with his large army, Jogaila fully expected to encounter no further resistance whatsoever, and he also expected that, once he arrived at the Grand Master's headquarters in Marienburg, that city too would surrender. Then all of Prussia would effectively fall under Polish control.

However, Jogaila hadn't counted on a Prussian man called Heinrich of Plauen. Heinrich of Plauen was a commander in the Teutonic Order and had been tasked by Grand Master Ulrich with the defense of western Prussia. The reason why Heinrich of Plauen was still alive and posing a possible future problem for the King of Poland was due to the fact that he hadn't fought at the Battle of Tannenberg.

As William Urban points out, this is rather odd. Grand Master Ulrich had just led the armies of Western Prussia, along with the leadership team of the Order, on a campaign to block the progress of the invading forces, and it's a bit weird that, instead of accompanying them, Heinrich of Plauen, the man supposedly in charge of the defense of western Prussia, was instead commanding 3,000 men inside a stronghold at Schwetz, which was located on the west bank of the Vistula, north of Kulm. Anyway, while we may never know exactly why Heinrich of Plauen had apparently been ordered to cool his heels with 3,000 men at Schwetz while the rest of the Teutonic forces were being cut down on a field near Tannenberg, it ended up being extremely fortunate for Prussia that Heinrich had been kept far away from the battle.

As news of the defeat spread across Prussia, Heinrich of Plauen didn't raise the white flag and offer to surrender the castle of Schwetz to the King of Poland. No, as soon as he was made aware of the current state of events, Heinrich ordered his 3,000 men to march as quickly as they could to Marienburg with the aim of reaching the city prior to the arrival of the Polish-Lithuanian army, and getting its defenses in order to assist it to resist an attack.

Heinrich did manage to reach Marienburg before the arrival of the Polish-Lithuanian forces and he immediately set about taking charge of everything. He sent word to surrounding villages and castles that they were to give up any thought of surrendering to the Polish King once the invaders passed by, and instead they were to resist and defend themselves. Concerned that he might not have enough men to counter a siege, Heinrich sent word to Livonia to send as many men as they could to Marienburg as quickly as possible, and sent a further message to Danzig that all members of the Teutonic Order stationed in the city needed to head to Marienburg as soon as possible, and he sent a similar call for men to the Master of the Teutonic Order in the Kingdom of Germany.

Then Heinrich got to work preparing the defenses of the stronghold at Marienburg. Cannon were brought into position and the storehouses inside the castle were ordered to be stocked with supplies. Then, in an indication of just how serious the situation was, Heinrich ordered that the entire town of Marienburg, which surrounded the castle, be burned and leveled to the ground. This would have the dual purpose of eliminating shelter and hiding places for the besiegers, and would remove any calls for the castle's defenses to be stretched further, all the way across the town to the city walls. Amazingly, all the men now under Heinrich's command, his 3,000 Schwetz troops, the garrison of Marienburg, a handful of secular knights, and the town's own militia (that is, fighting men who were tasked with protecting and defending the town of Marienburg) carried out this order without hesitation, and by the time the first scouts from the Polish army arrived to assess the situation, they found the castle fully defended, and they found the town around the castle reduced to a smoldering ruin.

As the main Polish-Lithuanian army made its way slowly to Marienburg, Heinrich ramped up efforts to stock the castle with supplies, and by the time the army arrived on the 25th of July, the storehouses inside the stronghold of Marienburg were filled to the brim with cheese, beer, grain, and bread, and pigs and cattle had been brought inside the castle walls. It was estimated that these supplies could comfortably feed the garrison for a period of between eight and ten weeks. Importantly, the fact that the storehouses at Marienburg now contained a significant amount of food and supplies, which had been hoovered up from the surrounding area, meant that the besieging army would not be able to use those supplies for itself.

As the Polish-Lithuanian armies moved into position and the siege began, Heinrich sent a cry for help to the Kingdom of Germany in the form of a letter. He wrote, and I quote "To all Princes, Barons, Knights and Men-at-Arms, and all other loyal Christians whomever this letter reaches. We, Brother Heinrich von Plauen, Castellan of Schwetz, acting in the place of the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order in Prussia, notify you that the King of Poland and Duke Vytautas, with a great force and with Saracen infidels, have besieged Marienburg. In this siege, truly all the Order's forces and power are being engaged. Therefore, we ask you, illustrious and noble Lords, to allow your subjects who wish to assist and defend us, for the love of Christ and all of Christendom, either for salvation or mercy, to come to our aid as quickly as possible so we can drive them away." End quote.

Basically, Heinrich was hoping that the remnants of the Teutonic Order could scramble some troops and send them to Marienburg, before the castle was either taken by force or was forced to capitulate due to starvation. And not surprisingly, many men did answer the call. The Master of Livonia and the Master of Germany both immediately sprang into action. Mercenaries were hired, and Michael Kuchmeister, who you might remember, was the administrator of Samogitia, managed to gather the Order's remaining men in the borderlands, and he headed to Marienburg as well.

Now this, of course, was bad news for Jogaila. He had been fully expecting Marienburg to surrender without a fight, so he hadn't even ordered his siege engines to be sent up from the army's crossing point on the Vistula. Instead, when he arrived at Marienburg, he found its formidable stronghold fully garrisoned and defended, and its town destroyed. Supplies were absent from the surrounding countryside, and members of the Teutonic Order were calmly smiling down at the besieging army from the castle's battlements.

But King Jogaila wasn't daunted by the situation. He ordered catapult machines and cannon to be confiscated from nearby castles, and he set them up outside Marienburg Castle, then began pummeling its formidable walls. He then sent a contingent of Polish forces to travel across western Prussia, accepting the surrender of towns, villages and strongholds. Ironically, the castle of Schwetz was one of the strongholds which surrendered to the Polish forces, its garrison of course, having been removed by Heinrich to Marienburg.

The Tartar fighters decided that sitting around besieging a castle wasn't really their cup of tea, so instead they roamed the countryside, raping, burning, murdering, and pillaging as much as they liked, and earning themselves a reputation for bloodthirsty savagery. Meanwhile, of course, the remains of the Teutonic forces were racing towards Marienburg, eager to save the headquarters of the Teutonic Order, the formidable Castle of Marienburg, from the all-conquering Polish and Lithuanian forces.

Will Jogaila succeed in taking Marienburg Castle? You'll need to tune in next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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