

History of the Crusades. Episode 306. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XI. The Siege of Marienburg.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Jogaila of Poland make his way towards the seat of power of the Teutonic Order, the city of Marienburg. The all-conquering victor of the Battle of Tannenberg spent much of his time on the road to Marienburg receiving offers of surrender from Prussian castles, towns, and villages, and Jogaila fully expected the city of Marienburg to do the same. However, the castellan of Schwetz Castle, a man named Heinrich of Plauen, had other ideas. He raced with the garrison of Schwetz to Marienburg and readied Marienburg Castle for a siege. As a result, by the time Jogaila arrived at Marienburg, the castle was fully defended and garrisoned, and held enough supplies to hold out for a period of between 8 to 10 weeks. Not to be deterred, Jogaila confiscated cannon and catapult machines from nearby castles and ordered his forces to begin pummeling the castle walls. At the same time, he sent part of his army out across Prussia to seek the surrender of the remaining towns and strongholds which had not yet submitted to Polish rule.

Fast-forward eight weeks, and Jogaila had still not managed to breach the defenses of Marienburg Castle. The good news was that pretty much all of Prussia had surrendered to Poland except for its two premier towns, Königsberg and Marienburg. But the bad news was that much of his army was getting restless and was eager for the siege to finish. The Lithuanian members of the army were struck down with some sort of stomach complaint, which some commentators believed was caused by the rich Prussian food, so Grand Duke Vytautas announced that he was taking the Lithuanians back home. Much to everyone's relief, the Tartars decided to depart as well.

Ominously for King Jogaila, just as his own army was leaving and shrinking, forces loyal to the Teutonic Order began arriving in Prussia to come to the aid of Heinrich of Plauen and his men. Men from the Livonian chapter of the Teutonic Order arrived at Königsberg, and Hungarian and German mercenaries arrived at Neumark, on Prussia's western border. The former administrator of Samogitia, Michael Kuchmeister, then used to these troops to make a sweep through western Prussia, ejecting and defeating any Polish troops he came across. When warships from the Hanseatic League weighed anchor on the coastline of Prussia, King Jogaila decided to implement his Plan B.

Plan A, which was to take the castle at Marienburg, had now pretty much come to nothing. Jogaila's was forced to concede the fact that he was no closer to taking the castle than he had been at the start of the siege, two months ago. The supplies inside the castle appeared to be holding out well, while his own supplies were dwindling and his army was eager to raise the siege and head home. Luckily, the eight week long period of the siege had given Jogaila ample opportunity to come up with a Plan B, which he now put into action.

His Plan B went a little something like this. Jogaila had ordered a fortress to be constructed at a place called Stuhm, just south of Marienburg. He stocked the fortress with supplies and garrisoned it with his best men. Then he ordered his army to retreat from Marienburg to Stuhm. Once he was content that the men in the garrison were as well equipped as they could possibly be, he left Stuhm and marched his army southwards towards the Polish border.

Heinrich of Plauen then took charge of the Prussian recovery effort. He sent a contingent of men in pursuit of the retreating Polish army, then ordered the men from Livonia to retake the cities of Elbing and Kulm, which they succeeded in doing. Meanwhile, the castellan of Ragnit Castle moved a number of Teutonic fighters from Samogitia into Prussia, then proceeded to sweep across eastern Prussia towards central Prussia, defeating and removing any occupying Polish troops as they went. By the end of October, the Teutonic Order had managed to retake every single Prussian castle, town and city, except for Thorn and a handful of towns in the borderlands. Even Jogaila's hastily-constructed stronghold at Stuhm was defeated after a three week long siege, and the men from its garrison were allowed to return to Poland with all of their possessions in return for their surrender.

Which really was very impressive when you think about it. Almost single-handedly, one man, Heinrich of Plauen, had saved both Prussia and the Teutonic Order from almost total annihilation.

And the bad news kept coming for Jogaila. Sigismund of Hungary spied an opportunity for himself to jump in to fill the power vacuum left by the Teutonic Order. He had held a lifelong ambition to become the Holy Roman Emperor and sensed that, if he played his cards right, he could step into the void left by the Teutonic Order and rally the Kingdom of Germany to come to Prussia's aid. If he could gain enough influence inside the Kingdom of Germany and present himself as the savior of German lands, institutions, and traditions, well, that wouldn't hurt his bid become Holy Roman Emperor one little bit. So seizing the moment with both hands, Sigismund declared war on the Kingdom of Poland, then he promptly raced over to the Kingdom of Germany to meet with the Electors there and rally the troops.

However, as it turned out, not many men from Germany ended up traveling to Prussia to assist the Teutonic Order. Surprisingly, most of the outside help in this regard ended up coming from Sigismund's brother, our old friend Wenceslas, the King of Bohemia. Now to be honest, Wenceslas didn't give two hoots about the fate of the Teutonic Order, and preferred getting drunk at parties to getting involved in the serious business of geopolitics. But the man who was sent to Bohemia on behalf of the Teutonic Order to request King Wenceslas' assistance, a man called Georg of Wirsberg, knew exactly how to push King Wenceslas' buttons, and in the end he managed to play him like a fiddle.

The King of Bohemia initially expressed no interest whatsoever in coming to the Order's rescue, so Georg of Wirsberg proceeded to bribe the right people in the royal court, showered the king's favorite mistresses with lavish gifts, then happened to let slip that perhaps there was a chance that Prussia might become a vassal of the Kingdom of Bohemia when things had all settled down. Suddenly, not only was Wenceslas giving permission for his subjects to go and fight in Prussia if they wish to do so, he found himself throwing money at the Teutonic Order to assist with Prussia's defense.

So the end result of all of this was that Prussia didn't end up falling to Poland immediately following the Battle of Tannenberg, and the Teutonic Order didn't end up being completely wiped out. In fact, the aftermath of the Battle of Tannenberg is really quite spectacularly odd. Prussia came within a whisker of falling and the Teutonic Order came within a whisker of collapsing. Actually, you would have to say that if Heinrich of Plauen had simply rolled back over in bed when told about the Teutonic Order's annihilation at the Battle of Tannenberg, and had lined up with everyone else to surrender Schwetz to Poland, things

would have been vastly different. But instead, both Prussia and the Teutonic Order rallied under Heinrich's leadership and brought themselves back from the brink.

But not completely. Although it had no idea at the time, the Teutonic Order would never fully recover from the Battle of Tannenberg. As William Urban states in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", the Battle of Tannenberg was like an incurable wound. Although the wound wasn't fatal initially, over the course of the next 50 years that wound is going to keep reopening and keep bleeding, until eventually the Teutonic Order will stumble, then collapse, then die. William Urban quotes the historian Stephen Turnbull, who in his book "Tannenberg, 1410" made the memorable remark that, whereas usually the decisive battle in a 50 year war is fought at the end of the 50 year period, in the case of Tannenberg it was the opposite, the most important battle in a 50 year long war was fought at the beginning of the conflict. If you are wondering whether we will be covering this 50 year long period which will oversee the demise of the Teutonic Order, yes. Yes, we will be.

But we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves. In October of the year 1410 the demise of the Teutonic Order was the last thing on Heinrich of Plauen's mind. No, he was fully occupied with the idea of rallying the allies of the Teutonic Order and striking back against the Kingdom of Poland for having the audacity to successfully invade Prussia.

Heinrich had already organized for the Order's allies to be encouraged to send fighting men to Prussia. Now he just needed to rebuild the Teutonic Order itself and ready it to lead the strike back against Poland. He summoned the remaining members of the Teutonic Order to a meeting of the General Chapter, which was scheduled to take place in early November of 1410. The Master of both the Livonian and German Chapters of the Order attended the meeting, as did the knights, sergeants and priests of the Order who were present in Marienburg. Unsurprisingly, Heinrich von Plauen was unanimously elected to become the Order's next Grand Master, while Michael Kuchmeister, the former administrator of Samogitia, was made Marshall of the Order.

The two men then immediately went on the offensive. Grand Master Heinrich led a force of men to the area around Thorn, and began a campaign to retake a number of castles in the region which had surrendered to Poland. Marshall Michael Kuchmeister took a contingent of fighting men into the Kingdom of Poland, and clashed with the Polish royal forces in what seems like a really odd chivalric battle.

In his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", William Urban describes how the battle took place in a way which more resembled a tournament or a contest, with combatants taking breaks from fighting to watch interesting individual match-ups between the two sides. The battle, now known as the Battle of Koronowo, was awash with chivalry, with both sides being allowed to take time out to tend to their wounded, and to rest themselves and their horses. Amazingly, there was even time for gifts of wine to be passed between the two opposing forces. It wasn't all high-fives, feats of bravado and drinking sessions though.

In the end, even a strange battle such as this one has to have a victor, and the Kingdom of Poland claimed victory after a Polish Knight managed to capture the Order's battle flag, after the bearer of the flag was unhorsed. This prompted a rapid retreat by the Teutonic Order and with the Polish cavalry in hot pursuit, many of the Order's men were captured and later ransomed, including Marshall Michael Kuchmeister.

Interestingly, the chivalry continued well after the battle. William Urban describes how the man who was unhorsed, causing the Order to lose its battle flag, later wrote to King Jogaila, pleading with him to write to his family and tell them how valiantly the poor Teutonic Knight had conducted himself in battle, in order to absolve him of some of the shame of being the person who lost the flag. King Jogaila apparently put ink to paper and complied with this request.

Anyway, after the Marshall and Teutonic Knights were ransomed and released, they returned to Prussia of the firm view that, should the Order focus all of its attentions on waging war against Poland, that would end up being a huge mistake. What was needed, argued the Marshall and his men, was a peace treaty, to enable the Order to regroup and re-energize. Waging a war against Poland at this point in time would not only be a wasteful use of the Order's scarce resources, it could actually prove to be disastrous.

This view gained a lot of public support across the still shell-shocked Prussia, and in the end, Grand Master Heinrich was forced to back down. With most of his leadership team now advocating for peace, not war, and with the visiting Masters of Livonia and Germany itching to return back home, the Grand Master knew that he didn't have the authority or the support to levy the vast amount of taxes needed to fund a massive campaign against Poland. So instead, Grand Master Heinrich invited King Jogaila to travel to Thorn, to meet with representatives from the Teutonic Order with a view to coming to some sort of peace arrangement.

Actually, this statement is a little misleading. The Grand Master traveled to Thorn with the Order's leadership team, but King Jogaila took up residence nearby. Deciding that, as the King of Poland, he was far too important a person to meet with the lowly Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, Jogaila sent representatives to the meeting to conduct the negotiations on his behalf.

The negotiations were lengthy, detailed and protracted, and resulted in a document called the Peace of Thorn being signed on the 1st of February in the year 1411. The totally weird thing about this peace treaty was that absolutely no one who signed it was happy with its terms. I guess it's understandable that the Teutonic Order was unhappy with it, since, as it had in effect lost the Battle of Tannenberg, it was likely that the Order would be the party making the most concessions. But due in some part to the weird aftermath of the battle, with Jogaila and Vytautas nearly defeating Prussia but then being left with nothing, it ended up that King Jogaila was also deeply unhappy with the terms of the agreement, as was Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania.

So what exactly were the terms of this peace agreement and why was everyone so unhappy about it? Well, you'll need to tune in next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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