

History of the Crusades. Episode 308. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XIII. Tales of Intrigue and Suspicion.

Hello again. Last week we examined the troubled provisions of the First Peace of Thorn, a treaty which was negotiated between the Teutonic Order, the Kingdom of Poland, and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the year 1411. In essence, the treaty stipulated that the Order was to hand Samogitia over to Lithuania, but only for the term of the remainder of King Jogaila and Grand Duke Vytautas' life spans. The treaty also stipulated that the Teutonic Order pay an absolutely massive sum of money to the victors of the Battle of Tannenberg, as both a war indemnity and as a ransom for the 14,000 or so German prisoners currently languishing in captivity in Poland. As Grand Master, Heinrich von Plauen was determined to raise the cash needed to pay the installments of the indemnity, and as he continued to employ expensive mercenaries and made moves to re-arm and re-equip the Teutonic Order, it wasn't hard to see that a financial tsunami was about to crash down on Prussian shores.

As we saw at the conclusion of last week's episode, the first victim of that tidal wave was the city of Danzig. In his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", William Urban notes that the manner in which the Teutonic Order dealt with the refusal by Danzig to pay the taxes to fund the first installment of the war indemnity was a sort of a fork-in-the-road moment. There were two paths open to the Grand Master regarding this dispute. As you may have noticed, we have entered the 15th century in our narrative, and across Europe, well, the times, they are a-changing. One of the many shifts which is just beginning to take place is the awakening of the idea of democracy, in the form of a gradual move to let some of the people have some sort of a voice in the decisions made which would govern their lives. Grand Master Heinrich caught a whiff of these winds of change, and he did actually end up establishing an assembly, whereby merchants, knights, and noblemen could have a say in the affairs of state. But by completely alienating Danzig and failing to punish his cousin, the captain of the garrison of the castle at Danzig, for causing the deaths of the influential group of merchants and city councilors who had led the opposition to the Order's new taxes, the Grand Master lost the opportunity to unite all the cities of Prussia behind his cause. Danzig was, after all, an extremely large, important, wealthy trading city, and even if the rest of Prussia stood proudly to attention waving the Teutonic flag, the fact that Danzig was now sullenly standing in the corner with its flag pointed to the ground and an angry look on its face was not going to augur well for the Teutonic Order moving forward. In fact, as William Urban states and I quote "Unfortunately for the Teutonic Order, Plauen's successors could not win back the love of the citizens of Danzig." End quote.

So instead of choosing the path of cooperation and consultation, making sure that all the cities of Prussia were united under the leadership of the Teutonic Order, Grand Master Heinrich chose the path which probably seemed the easiest to walk at that time. He hit Danzig with a big stick, forced it into line, ignored its objections, then collected his tax money and paid the first installment of funds due under the First Peace of Thorn.

And unfortunately for Grand Master Heinrich, the wealthy, influential, and grand city of Danzig, wasn't the only entity exhibiting disloyalty to his position. William Urban points out that there had been a recent trend in Germany, which had now apparently spread to Prussia, for groups of Knights to form themselves into subgroups.

Now, everyone loves to be in a club. You get to have a secret handshake, a cool name, and you meet at your headquarters, where you allocate lofty-sounding titles to yourself and

dream about the conquests your new club can make, and the places your new club can take you. While many of these newly formed groups were probably harmless and little more than excuses for extra comradeship and extended drinking sessions, some of the groups were actually beginning to cause headaches for those in power.

One such group was called the Lizard League, and yes, I'm not kidding, a group of knights from the Teutonic Order, back in the early 1400s did actually formed themselves into a club called the Lizard League, and the head of the Lizard League was a man called Nicholas of Renys. Now, Nicholas of Renys and his Lizard League buddies began to become worryingly influential, and they named amongst their supporters the Bishop of Ermland and some other influential figures in the halls of power inside Prussia. Of concern for Grand Master Heinrich was the fact that the Lizard League had formulated a cunning plan to oust Grand Master Heinrich and place their own man into the position of Grand Master. The man they had selected to replace Grand Master Heinrich was Georg of Wirsberg, the diplomat who, you might remember from back in episode 306, was tasked by the Teutonic Order with going to the Kingdom of Bohemia and doing everything he could to secure the support of King Wenceslas.

Now, you might remember from Episode 306 that King Wenceslas was not terribly keen to reaffirm his commitment to the losers of the Battle of Tannenberg, and in the end, the only way in which Georg of Wirsberg could succeed in his mission was to bribe members of the Royal Bohemian Court, including the King's favorite mistress, and then hint to the King that if both Prussia and the Teutonic Order survived, then maybe Prussia would end up becoming a vassal of the Kingdom of Bohemia. That "promise" had been enough to tip the King of Bohemia over the line, and he had thrown a bunch of mercenaries and wads of cash in Prussia's direction.

The good news was both Prussia and the Teutonic Order had survived following their defeat at Tannenberg. The bad news was that now, the King of Bohemia was tapping his fingers impatiently on the arms of his throne, waiting for Prussia to submit itself to Bohemian rule. Understandably, this was causing a significant amount of stress for Georg of Wirsberg, who it turned out hadn't actually ended up mentioning this part of the bargain to Grand Master Heinrich. In fact, the only way in which Georg could see his way out of this mess was for him, Georg, to become the next Grand Master. Then he would have the power to both make Wenceslas the Protector of Prussia, and to direct the Teutonic Order to submit to Bohemian rule. Of course, in order to oust Grand Master Heinrich and see himself elected to the position, George needed to secure widespread support inside Prussia. Unsurprisingly, all the Bohemian mercenaries currently serving inside Prussia were on board with his plan, and so was the Lizard League, which began working its contacts inside the Teutonic Order.

Unfortunately for George, his plans began to unravel when Grand Master Heinrich unexpectedly told the Bohemian mercenaries that he had no further need for their services and then sent them home to Bohemia. The wheels then seriously fell off when the networking efforts of the Lizard League alerted some Grand Master Heinrich loyalists to the plot.

Grand Master Heinrich struck back swiftly. He ordered the leader of the Lizard League, Nicholas of Renys, to be arrested and executed, then had Georg of Wirsberg brought before a meeting of the General Chapter of the Order, so that the members of the Order could determine his fate. The General Chapter of the Order proclaimed that the

appropriate punishment for Georg was imprisonment, so Georg was hauled off in chains, and in fact stayed in prison for the next eighteen years.

Now this rather entertaining little piece of skull-duggery, unfortunately, had the potential to be a diplomatic and foreign relations disaster for the Order. Prior to the Battle of Tannenberg, the Order's most loyal allies in the region were King Wenceslas of Bohemia and his brother Sigismund of Hungary. Now, with the plot by Georg and the Lizard League uncovered, King Wenceslas of Bohemia was about to become rather cross. And if King Wenceslas removed his support for the Teutonic Order, then the King's brother, Sigismund of Hungary, may follow suit, leaving the Order with a greatly reduced number of regional allies. Fortunately for everyone, although not for the Holy Roman Emperor, just when King Wenceslas was demanding that the Grand Master release Georg of Wirsberg from captivity and submit itself to Bohemian rule, the Holy Roman Emperor Ruprecht died. Everyone's eyes, particularly the eyes of King Wenceslas and Sigismund of Hungary, then turned away from Prussia, towards the Holy Roman Empire.

Basically everyone who then threw their hat into the ring to become the next Emperor was a relative of the King of Bohemia. Wenceslas' brother Sigismund had been angling to become the Holy Roman Emperor for a number of years, and had steadily been increasing his reach and influence inside the Kingdom of Germany in anticipation of this event. So it didn't surprise anyone when Sigismund raised his hand and requested to be considered for the position. His cousin, Jobst of Brandenburg was also asked to be considered, along with - wait for it - King Wenceslas himself, who totally failed to read the room and somehow expected everyone to forget that he had been Emperor once before and had done such a bad job of it that he had been removed from office.

Everyone pretty much ignored Wenceslas' bid for the title, so the election ended up being between Sigismund and Jobst. There was a great deal of politicking and behind-the-scenes wrangling over who would vote for who, not helped by the fact that the Papal schism was still ongoing and that each Pope picked a different candidate. In the end, Jobst scored the most votes and was elected to the position of Emperor. But wouldn't you know it? Poor Jobst died suddenly and unexpectedly a few months later, possibly of poisoning, and when a fresh election was held, Sigismund sailed comfortably through, being elected unanimously in July of 1411.

So, now Sigismund of Hungary is the new Holy Roman Emperor, and will be spending his time and resources less on the politics of Hungary, Bohemia, and Prussia and more on the politics of central Europe, as he attempts to consolidate and increase his support inside the Kingdom of Germany and across the rest of his Empire. Will this affect the relationship between Prussia, Hungary and Bohemia? Well, not so far as King Wenceslas is concerned. He continued to maintain that he was legally entitled to the overlordship of Prussia, and he threatened to both arrest any members of the Teutonic Order he found inside the Kingdom of Bohemia and confiscate the Order's extensive Bohemian property portfolio.

Grand Master Heinrich decided to ignore the rantings and demands of King Wenceslas, but he was concerned about the depth and extent of the reach of the Lizard League inside the Teutonic Order, and he decided that a thorough investigation was warranted.

Fortunately, at this point in time, a bunch of crusaders arrived in Prussia, eager to fight some pagans. With the peace of the First Peace of Thorn having descended over the

region though, there were no pagans to Crusade against, so to give them something to do, Grand Master Heinrich requested the Crusaders to open an investigation into anti-Teutonic Order conspiracies and whether there were still any rogue elements inside the Order which needed to be rooted out. Some questions which the Grand Master wanted answers to included: Did anti-Teutonic elements inside the Order contribute to the Order's defeat at Tannenberg? What role, if any, did the Bishop of Ermland play in all of this? And are the counselors and influential merchants and noblemen inside Prussian cities part of an anti-Teutonic conspiracy? A crusading Bavarian Duke was tasked with heading up the investigation, and after spending fourteen months examining conspiracy theories and chasing a number of rabbits down a number of holes, the Duke was unable to come up with anything conclusive, just a lot of innuendo, finger pointing and baseless accusations. As William Urban states, and I quote "The Bavarian Duke went home after having spent fourteen months in Prussia, bringing back tales of intrigue and suspicion." End quote.

Now, while this extensive yet fruitless investigation was underway, the second installment of the massive amount of war indemnity and ransom money became due. The good news was, with the assistance of the tax increases, Grand Master Heinrich was able to make this payment. The further good news was, as a part of this installment of funds the ransom of a bunch of Teutonic Knights was paid, and those men now made their way out of Poland back to Prussia. But the bad news was that the largest and final third installment still needed to be paid, and the very bad news was that there was absolutely no way that the Teutonic Order was going to be able to pay this amount. The Grand Master had mined the taxpayers of Prussia for all they were worth, and even he, the ever-optimistic Heinrich von Plauen, could see that asking the suffering citizens of Prussia to dig deeper into their pockets just wasn't going to work, and would likely lead to a backlash against the Teutonic Order which would make the recent intrigues of the Lizard League look like child's play.

So, figured the Grand Master, any assistance in paying this massive amount of money was going to need to come from outside Prussia. The Grand Master's thoughts then turned to his ally Sigismund of Hungary, who was now the powerful Emperor Sigismund. Can Emperor Sigismund save the day and cough up the funds the Grand Master needs? Well, you need to tune in next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

This podcast is powered by Patreon. If you can spare \$1 per month and would like to support this podcast, go to patreon.com and search for "History of the Crusades", or go to our website, crusadespod.com, and click on the Patreon link. Your \$1 contribution will mean you get access to an extra episode every fortnight on topics related to the Crusades, and it means that you are powering the History of the Crusades podcast. Thank you to all who have signed up so far.

End