

## History of the Crusades. Episode 311. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XVI. The Hunger War.

Hello again. Last time we saw the Marshall of the Teutonic Order Michael Kuchmeister decide to remove Grand Master Heinrich von Plauen from his leadership position, a move which Michael Kuchmeister calculated would bring an end to the recent aggression shown by the Order towards the Kingdom of Poland, and herald the dawn of a new age of peace in the region.

Unfortunately though, the move didn't herald the dawn of a new age of peace in the region. When the new Grand Master Michael Kuchmeister met with King Jogaila of Poland, he found him resistant to all reasonable offers of peace, and the new Grand Master reluctantly formed the conclusion that the Teutonic Order needed to prepare to go to war against Poland. The belligerent moves then made by Grand Master Michael Kuchmeister failed spectacularly, as a large combined Polish and Lithuanian army invaded Prussia, retraced the route it had taken prior to the Battle of Tannenberg, then turned northwards towards the Prussian coastline. When we left last week's episode, the Tartar fighters which formed part of the Lithuanian army were menacing the local population, raping, pillaging, murdering, and destroying anything in their path, while Grand Master Michael Kuchmeister watched on from a distance, powerless to stop them.

Now, when the Polish and Lithuanian armies invaded Prussia in July of 1414, the annual harvest was just about to commence. Across Prussia, grains were beginning to be collected from the fields, storehouses were starting to fill up with food for the next winter, and millers and bakers were kept busy turning the newly-harvested grain into flour and bread. As the invading army advanced through the Prussian heartland, the harvest was disrupted, as the Tartars destroyed crops, storehouses, and mills as part of their destructive rampage. The invaders then helped themselves to a food which had been set aside to get the Prussian people through the coming winter.

King Jogaila and Grand Duke Vytautas knew, as did Grand Master Michael Kuchmeister, that the Teutonic Order just didn't have enough men to defeat the invaders in a pitched battle. As a result, King Jogaila did everything he could think of to goad the Order into a confrontation, while the Grand Master did everything he could think of to avoid that confrontation. Convinced that the peace-loving Grand Master would be forced to come to the aid of the Prussian people if things got bad enough, King Jogaila did everything he could to try and ensure that things would get bad enough, and the Prussian people suffered greatly as the Tartars raped and murdered innocent civilians, while the invaders ate their food and destroyed their farmhouses and homes.

Now, Jogaila has traditionally been a very talented military strategist, but in his policy of hoeing the boot repeatedly into the local Prussians and flaunting their suffering in his attempt to force the Grand Master's hand, Jogaila may have miscalculated. In his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", William Urban points out that prior to this invasion there had been widespread public support for the Kingdom of Poland across Prussia. This support was highlighted by the apparent willingness for vast swathes of the Prussian population to surrender to Poland without a murmur of protest following the Battle of Tannenberg. The suffering currently being imposed on Prussia however, turned many Prussians against Poland. As William Urban states, when Jogaila used the suffering of the local population to try to tempt the Teutonic Order into battle, and I quote "he earned the

hatred of the Prussian nobles, townsmen, and peasants, who might have become his allies." End quote.

The Grand Master's response to Jogaila's devastating strategy was to do everything he could to force Jogaila to order his armies to withdraw from Prussia, without actually confronting the invaders militarily. How do you force a massive invading army to withdraw from your territory without actually drawing your sword? Well, the Grand Master came up with two ways to address this problem.

Firstly, he decided that the Order needed to ensure that neither King Jogaila nor Grand Duke Vytautas could secure any castles, strongholds, or fortified towns for themselves. Should the invading armies successfully take a stronghold, castle, or town, that would result in them having a foothold inside Prussia and would discourage their withdrawal. So the Grand Master needed to make sure that any Polish or Lithuanian siege of any Prussian asset would ultimately be unsuccessful. How could the Grand Master ensure that this would be the case? Well, he needed to remove any food supplies from around the castles, strongholds, and towns in the path of the invading army. If there was no food available to sustain the invaders as they besieged a stronghold or town, then the invaders would not be able to bring the siege to a successful conclusion.

In addition to removing any food sources which may aid the siege of a Prussian asset, the Grand Master decided that he could take the lack-of-food strategy to a whole new level, and use it to force the invaders to withdraw from Prussia. A large army needs a great deal of food to sustain it. The Polish and Lithuanian forces were currently obtaining their food from the Prussian countryside. This was already causing some minor problems for Jogaila's forces, as meals made from the rich Prussian food were causing outbreaks of stomach complaints and dysentery amongst some of the Lithuanian, Tartar, and Russian men. The Grand Master decided that if he could cut off their food supplies completely, the Polish and Lithuanian armies would be forced to head back home before their fighting men starved.

So, while the invaders had caused much damage to harvests, buildings, and storehouses, the Teutonic Order now moved in to complete the destruction. As a result, not only were harvests, storehouses, and sources of food like cattle and other farm animals wiped out, entire villages were destroyed along with all the infrastructure which the local Prussian population would need to grow and store their food well into the future. Mills, warehouses, farm buildings, in short, anything even vaguely involved in the production of food was dismantled and destroyed by the Teutonic Order.

In the end, this tactic did succeed in bringing King Jogaila to the negotiating table, but it also had a devastating long term impact on the Prussian people. As William Urban points out, while that resulted in the invading forces starving while they were inside Prussia, once they withdrew it was the turn of the Prussian people to starve. As so often happens, the weakened Prussian population was subsequently hit with outbreaks of the plague once the invaders withdrew. The bouts of starvation inflicted on both sides to the conflict ended up giving the conflict its name: The Hunger War.

Anyway, in October of the year 1414, only three months after it had started, the Hunger War came to an end, when a Papal Legate managed to successfully broker a temporary truce between the Teutonic Order and the Kingdom of Poland. The Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania then withdrew from Prussia, and the Teutonic Order

was left to assess its losses. Despite the fact that the Order hadn't engaged in any fighting during the Hunger War, losses were suffered in the plague which followed the famine which followed the end of the Hunger War. As a result, William Urban points out that, despite all the trouble which the previous Grand Master Heinrich von Plauen had taken to rebuild the Order's forces, by the end of the year 1414, the number of knights contained within the Teutonic Order had been reduced to around half of the number which had existed prior to the Battle of Tannenberg, and many of those knights were either very young or very old and infirm.

Unfortunately for Grand Master Michael Kuchmeister, the two year truce which was brokered after the Hunger War didn't put an end to the threat posed to Prussia by Poland. While the truce did operate to suspend hostilities between the two warring parties, it left King Jogaila effectively with the option of invading Prussia once again should he choose to do so. As a result, in addition to assisting many starving Prussians to purchase grain to get them through the winter, the Grand Master was forced to raise taxes and melt down any silver remaining in the Order's treasury in an attempt to pay mercenaries, in a desperate bid to bring the Teutonic Order up to a level which would deter Poland from invading once again.

Now, clearly, things are starting to look a little desperate for the Teutonic Order at this stage. Realistically, the Order just didn't have enough resources, and couldn't extract enough taxes from its struggling population, to bring its fighting force back up to pre-Tannenberg levels. But if it didn't bring itself back up to pre-Tannenberg levels, it was pretty clear that Prussia was under the real threat of being invaded by, and conquered by, the Kingdom of Poland.

It was around this time, unsurprisingly, that the Grand Master decided that the only way to save Prussia from becoming part of Poland was to get itself some powerful allies who could either assist the Order to invade Poland, or at the very least, ensure that, if Poland did attempt to annex Prussia once again, a bunch of powerful foreign armies would be willing to race to the Order's defense. Looking desperately around Europe, the Grand Master decided that they were really only two possible contenders for possible saviors of the Teutonic Order. These contenders were Emperor Sigismund and the Papacy.

Traditionally most of the crusaders who had traveled to Prussia to assist the Order in its military campaigns had come from the Holy Roman Empire, with the vast majority traveling from the Kingdom of Germany. Sigismund was now the King of Germany in addition to being the Holy Roman Emperor, but to be honest, he was really more Hungarian than German, and the Grand Master was concerned that Sigismund didn't really appreciate the importance of the Teutonic Order and the prominent role which the Grand Master believed the Order should play in Baltic affairs.

This was actually a valid concern. To Emperor Sigismund, the failing state of the Teutonic Order was just a minor matter. He was willing to agree to come to the Order's aid if Poland looked like it was going to do something which would affect wider regional interests, or more particularly Hungarian concerns, but really, the Emperor had a lot on his plate and had bigger fish to fry than propping up a weakened military Order.

So that just left the Papacy. The Teutonic Order had fought, and pretty much won, centuries worth of Crusades against the pagans in the Baltic region. At the current point in

time however, the Teutonic Order needed military assistance to fight, not the pagans, but the Latin Christian Kingdom of Poland, and that was something the Papacy may balk at.

The situation wasn't helped by the fact that there were actually three Popes in existence at the current time: a Pope sitting in Rome; a Pope sitting in Avignon; and Pope John XXIII, who had been elected by the Council of Pisa. This was clearly way too many Popes, and one of the many items on Emperor Sigismund's to-do list was to end the great schism which had now been troubling the Latin Christian Church for nearly 40 years, and was the cause of the excessive amount of Popes.

Pope John XXIII had successfully worked to increase his support base, and he was also of the view that there were too many Popes. Pope John thought that there should only be one Pope, and that Pope, of course, should be Pope John XXIII, so it was with much fanfare and anticipation that Pope John issued a Papal Bull calling on the Church to meet in a Council at Constance in November of the year 1414, to try to end the Great Schism, and cull the number of Popes back down to the much more manageable number of one.

Now, the Grand Master spied an opportunity here. All the power brokers of Europe would be focusing on the matters discussed at the Council of Constance, and the Grand Master figured that if he could just get the issue of the needs of the Teutonic Order added to the agenda of items to be discussed at the Council, then perhaps all of his problems could be solved. The Order's men in Rome, and the Order's men of influence whom the Order could bribe to lobby Pope John, were all put to work, and as a result, not only will the Council of Constance be attempting to resolve the Great Schism, and not only will it feature the trial of Jan Hus of Hussite fame, it will also provide a platform for the Teutonic Order to attempt to save itself from decline.

Join me next week as we take a look at the dramatic events which took place at the Council of Constance in the year 1414. Until next week, bye for now.

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