

History of the Crusades. Episode 316. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XXI. War and Peace.

Hello again. Last week we covered events which had occurred in the Baltic region while the Council of Constance was holding everyone's attention. In a nutshell, we saw that just about every ruler was troubled by succession issues. Problems caused by a lack of an heir were highlighted when Emperor Sigismund attempted to have himself crowned as the King of Bohemia following Wenceslas' death in the year 1419, only to be run out of town due to his lack of popularity. We also saw Svitrigaila break free from his jail cell in Ukraine, and he is now roaming around somewhere in Europe.

Now, in the early 1420s, the main political issue in the Baltic region was the continuing unrest in Prague. Basically, supporters of the executed Jan Hus were fermenting a popular rebellion across the city with anti-Church, anti-German and above all anti-Emperor Sigismund themes. Just about everything Sigismund did to try to calm the rebels and get them to settle down ended up having the opposite effect. In fact, the Bohemian tradition of "defenestration", or the act of dealing with your opponents by hurling them out of a window, began in the year 1419, when a bunch of Hussite supporters threw a judge and a bunch of town councilors out of a window in a tower in the Prague City Hall. This act of defenestration is considered to be the official start of the Hussite Wars, and at the moment Emperor Sigismund is trying desperately to put a lid on the Hussite rebellion by crushing them militarily, but the involvement of the Imperial Armies is just causing more and more people inside the Kingdom of Bohemia to come out in support of the Hussites.

While Emperor Sigismund is spending all his time and focus on matters Bohemian, and while he is leading the Imperial forces to a number of embarrassing defeats at the hands of the rebels, his popularity has plunged to new levels, not only in Bohemia but across the Kingdom of Germany and even in Hungary. As Emperor Sigismund's popularity takes a nosedive, the leaders of the Hussite movement are steadily increasing their influence across the region, and are even sending feelers out into Poland and Lithuania to attempt to extend their rebellion beyond Bohemia's borders. So, now begins an extensive political tussle, whereby Emperor Sigismund is doing all he can to convince his allies to send military assistance his way to help him to deal with the pesky Hussites, and all the main political players, Pope Martin V, the Teutonic Order, King Jogaila, and Grand Duke Vytautas are attempting to leverage Emperor Sigismund's desperation to gain advantages for themselves.

Some of these political plays were actually quite entertaining. For instance, leaders of the Hussite rebels approached King Jogaila for assistance in their fight against Emperor Sigismund. While King Jogaila decided that overtly aiding the Hussites would bring too much grief his way from the Church, he told the Hussites to pop over to Lithuania and have a word with Grand Duke Vytautas.

The fact that the Kingdom of Poland had been the first port of call for the Hussites in their search for regional support gave King Jogaila pause for thought. If King Jogaila managed to somehow become the King of Bohemia, then perhaps that would solve everyone's problems. His popularity amongst the rebels meant that the Bohemians would be more likely to unite under Jogaila's rule, and Sigismund could go back to focusing on German and wider Imperial affairs. To put his plan into action, the newly widowed Jogaila approached Sigismund and requested the hand in marriage of Sigismund's daughter Elizabeth. Sigismund reacted with pure horror and quickly married Elizabeth off to the

Archduke of Austria, who promised in return to provide military aid to Sigismund in his war against the Hussites.

Emperor Sigismund then met with Grand Master Michael Kuchmeister to try to obtain a similar offer of support from the Order. Michael Kuchmeister let it be known that perhaps if the borders of Samogitia could be redrawn so that the mouth of the Nemunas River and the coastline of Samogitia all the way up to the fortress of Memel would once again be considered to be part of Prussia, well maybe then he could see his way to provide the requested aid. Emperor Sigismund decided that this was a fair bargain, and promptly ordered the borders of Samogitia to be redrawn in the Order's favor.

A furious Vytautas and Jogaila decided that this wouldn't do at all, so early in the year 1422 King Jogaila requested to meet with Emperor Sigismund and offered him the military services of the Kingdom of Poland on the condition that Sigismund change the Samogitian borders back to the way they had previously been. Not wishing to lose the support of the Teutonic Order, Emperor Sigismund declined Jogaila's offer, but then came up with a ploy of his own. Knowing that Jogaila was keen to gain a foothold into Bohemian politics, Emperor Sigismund offered Jogaila the hand in marriage of King Wenceslas' elderly widow Sophia. King Jogaila may have blinked a few times at the thought of marrying a woman well past her child-bearing years, then he politely declined the Emperor's offer.

Meanwhile, Grand Duke Vytautas, still outraged by the Samogitian border issue, greeted the Hussite envoys with open arms when they arrived in Lithuania. Deciding that he should explore the situation a little further before committing Lithuania to a head-on collision with Emperor Sigismund and the Church, he sent one of his advisers, a man named Sigismund Korybutas, who also happened to be Jogaila's nephew, back to Bohemia with the Hussites to do a little on-the-ground research.

In the end, Korybutas did more than just scout out the local situation. He quickly formed ties with both moderate and radical Hussite groups, and his actions drew the attention of Pope Martin V, who promptly excommunicated Korybutas, then rebuked Vytautas for supporting a bunch of anti-Latin Christian heretics. In order to attempt to placate Rome, King Jogaila then ordered his nephew to come straight home from Bohemia. When Korybutas failed to obey his uncle, Jogaila threw his hands into the air and said "kids these days", etcetera, etcetera. Then Korybutas ended up leading the Hussite forces in a successful attempt to block a combined German and Teutonic Order invasion of Bohemia in the year 1422.

The failure of this attempt by the Teutonic Order to combine with Imperial troops to defeat the Hussite heretics seems to have been the last straw for Grand Master Michael Kuchmeister. He had been struggling with health issues for some time. He was overweight, and historians believe that he may have been suffering from kidney stones, which of course was a very painful affliction if you were living in medieval Europe. In March of 1422, following the defeat of the Order's forces in Bohemia, the Teutonic Knights called for his resignation and Michael Kuchmeister obliged.

The man who was elected to replace him was Paul of Rusdorf. Paul of Rusdorf was raised to the position of Grand Master on a "peacemaker's" platform, which was a little ironic considering that Michael Kuchmeister had ousted Heinrich von Plauen for exactly the same reason.

Unfortunately for Grand Master Paul, his peacemaker efforts got off to a rocky start. The Order was already committed to support Emperor Sigismund in his war against the Hussites, but Grand Master Paul believed he had secured an understanding from King Jogaila that Poland had no interest in attacking Prussia at this time. So when King Jogaila and Grand Duke Vytautas began massing their armies near the Prussian border, they merely had to tell the new Grand Master that they were getting ready to mobilize to Bohemia to fight the Hussites, and the Grand Master nodded and smiled in relief.

However, Grand Master Paul stopped nodding and smiling when the combined Polish and Lithuanian army invaded Prussia in the summer of 1422, and made its now familiar way to Osterode. Poor Grand Master Paul then faced exactly the same problem as the two previous Grand Masters who had gone before him. The Order's forces were simply not large enough to confront the invaders without risking another Tannenberg type situation, and the Order didn't have enough spare cash lying around for it to quickly hire enough mercenaries to bolster its ranks. In addition, most of the Order's allies had already committed their forces to the war against the Hussites, and for reasons which are a little unclear, the Livonian Chapter of the Order also indicated that it couldn't spare any men, so Grand Master Paul was forced to make do with what he had. He gathered all the local Prussian forces he could muster, not only Teutonic Knights and fighters, but Prussian militia, secular knights, and garrisons from Prussian towns. He ordered the main army to muster in Kulm, then sent any additional men on raiding missions into Poland.

While the Prussians were advancing from Neumark and other regions of Prussia into Poland, the combined Polish-Lithuanian army reached Osterode, then turned towards Marienburg, raiding and pillaging as they went. Now, unfortunately for the local Prussians, a sizable Tartar contingent was traveling with the Lithuanian forces, and yes, despite their well publicized recent conversion to Christianity, the Tartars hadn't changed their murderous ways, raping, killing, and burning as they made their way into the Prussian heartland.

By mid-September, King Jogaila decided that it might be time to sound out the Grand Master's position on peace talks. The Grand Master thought that peace talks were a splendid idea, so a meeting was called for the parties to attempt to thrash out an agreement on the shores of Lake Melno, which was not far from Tannenberg. The weird thing about these peace talks was that none of the main parties attended. King Jogaila and Grand Duke Vytautas authorized some representatives to negotiate on their behalf, then they departed for a spot of hunting. Grand Master Paul sent the Bishops of Ermland and Pomesania, the Marshall of the Livonian Chapter of the Order, and three Knights, to attend on his behalf.

The good news was that after only four days of talks the delegates managed to reach an agreement. The bad news was, with all the main parties to the agreement absent, delays were incurred while they were contacted and informed of the decision. In his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", William Urban reports that the official seals, which each party would affix on the agreement, had to be brought all the way to the lakeside, with a high degree of caution and security, as if one of the seals went missing in transit it could be used to forge official documents.

Anyway, these delays provided the Grand Master with an opportunity to re-negotiate some of the more important concessions made in the agreement, and it also enabled him to send the Marshall of the Order over to Emperor Sigismund to request his intervention.

These behind-the-scenes machinations ended up backfiring on the Grand Master when King Jogaila approached the Bishops of Ermland and Pomesania to seek extra concessions from them, and the cherry on the Poland peace-talk-cake came when King Jogaila managed to meet with Emperor Sigismund after his meeting with the Teutonic Order.

At this meeting, Jogaila managed to convince Emperor Sigismund to backpedal on all the commitments he had just made to the Teutonic Order. But wait, there's more. King Jogaila then went further, and managed to convince Emperor Sigismund to sever his military ties with the Teutonic Order and to reverse his recent decision regarding the boundaries of Samogitia. What did Emperor Sigismund receive in order for pretty much knifing the Teutonic Order in the back? Well, Jogaila told Sigismund that he would order his nephew to return from his Hussite adventures, and would punish him for his involvement by confiscating his Polish estates. Then Jogaila promised to send 30,000 men to Sigismund to defeat the Hussites once and for all. As William Urban puts it, and I quote "In short, Sigismund sold out the Teutonic Order and Jogaila sold out Vytautas" end quote.

But as William Urban also points out, once the dust had settled, everyone was left feeling as though they had won a concession. Sigismund obtained an army for his Hussite War; the Teutonic Order won a peace treaty which its peace-loving Grand Master was desperate to obtain; Jogaila got to put the boot into the Teutonic Order and drive a wedge between the Order and Emperor Sigismund; and even Vytautas got something: he got the borders of Samogitia redrawn to his liking.

While everyone was congratulating themselves and patting themselves on the back though, the wider ramifications of the Peace of Lake Melno, as it later became known, wouldn't become apparent until further down the track. What were these wider ramifications? Well, the Peace of Lake Melno, and the manner in which it was negotiated, ended up heralding a regional power shift. The man who had initiated the attack on Prussia, and the man who had manipulated the aftermath of the peace talks to his advantage, was of course King Jogaila of Poland, and by his actions he had pretty much signaled that the Kingdom of Poland was now the power to be reckoned with in the region. The other parties to the agreement had pretty much been played by Jogaila, and their power and influence, and yes, even that of Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund, was now on the wane.

Join me next week as the main players continue their political wrangling at a major conference convened by Vytautas in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Until next week, bye for now.

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