

History of the Crusades. Episode 320. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XXV. The Decline of the Teutonic Order.

Hello again. Last week we saw the exit of many of our players from the stage, with King Jogaila and Emperor Sigismund both joining Vytautas in departing, both from their earthly lives and from this podcast. Once all the dust had finally settled, we saw Poland and Lithuania strongly bound together once again under the rule of Jogaila's second-eldest son Casimir, who became the Grand Duke of Lithuania in the year 1440 and became the King of Poland in the year 1447, ruling as King Casimir IV. King Casimir IV will enjoy a long and successful rule, until his death near the end of the fifteenth century in the year 1492. In this episode, you probably won't be too surprised to learn, we will be taking a look at the demise of our final player on the Baltic Crusade stage, the Teutonic Order.

Now, as you may have noticed, things really haven't been going all that well for the Teutonic Order since its defeat at the Battle of Tannenberg. No one wants to join a military Order which keeps losing battles, so the ranks of the Teutonic Order are now predominantly filled by not entirely useful older Knights, who understand the Order's ways but aren't the sort of men you want to see lined up in battle, and young recruits, who were the sort of men who tried and failed to get better gigs elsewhere. To put it bluntly, many, or perhaps even most, of the Order's fighting men were pretty hopeless, with both the younger and older Knights not terribly proficient on the battlefield, and with an increasing number of the new recruits struggling to understand or come to terms with the Order's religious and disciplinary requirements.

The result of all of this is that Grand Master Paul of Rusdorf is increasingly having to deal with the incompetence of his fighting men, and he is also facing issues such as heavy drinking, gambling, and laziness amongst the Order's ranks. This led to the Grand Master to rely more and more on mercenaries, which in turn accelerated the decline in the quality and commitment of the men actually in the Teutonic Order.

If even the Grand Master could see that the Order was better served by relying on outside help on the battlefield than on its own Knights and fighters, then that didn't do anything at all to increase morale amongst the Order's ranks, or to attract anyone other than rejects and losers to the Order. The situation ended up getting so bad that the Grand Master attempted to crack down on the laziness, the drinking, and the gambling going on inside the Order, but the more he tried to enforce his old-school ways on the bunch of miscreants under his control, the more push-back he received.

In fact, the resistance coming from all sorts of quarters to the Grand Master's attempts to pull his troops back into line may have led him to become slightly unhinged. Grand Master Paul began seeing conspiracies against him popping up everywhere. Some of these conspiracies may have been grounded in reality, but enough of them were clearly the result of increasing paranoia on the Grand Master's part that alarm bells started going off, and moves started to be made to remove the Grand Master from power.

Most of these moves came from the Order's German Master, a man called Eberhard of Saunshiem. Master Eberhard just happened to stumble across a document purportedly written in the year 1329 which, wouldn't you know it, gave the German Master a greater role in the operation of the Order than had traditionally been the case. In fact, the document helpfully stated that the German Master could, in some circumstances, validly

remove a Grand Master from power, if the said Grand Master was inept or mentally unfit to continue in the position.

The German Master waved the document at Grand Master Paul, who promptly declared it to be a forgery. The German chapter of the Order maintained that the document was valid and sought a resolution to that effect from the Church Council at Basel. Pope Martin V had died back in the year 1431, so the Grand Master wrote to the new Pope, Eugenius IV, who was currently feuding with the Church Council, for a formal Papal determination.

The Grand Master then demanded, on three separate occasions, that Master Eberhard attend a General Chapter meeting of the Order. When it had become clear that the German Master would not be complying with the order that he attend the meeting, the Grand Master suspended him from office. But Master Eberhard refused to leave. Instead, he called on the Grand Master to step down. Ripple effects from this incident spread out across Prussia all the way to the Livonian Chapter of the Order, and the Grand Master found himself facing a revolt by factions inside the Livonian Chapter, as well as from influential commanders from the Order inside Prussia and Germany. Moves were then made to oust the Grand Master's supporters from positions of power inside the Order, and eventually, in January of the year 1441, the Grand Master relinquished his office, with the Marshall of the Order, Konrad of Erlichshausen, being elected as the new Grand Master.

However, the same problems which had faced Grand Master Paul were now surfacing under the new Grand Master Konrad, who struggled to maintain discipline and morale, while the reputation of the Order moved away from its original mainstays of obedience, poverty, and chastity, towards a more unsavory destination. As William Urban points out in his book "The last Years of the Teutonic Knights", eventually the Order will find itself in such a state of reduced circumstances that a proverb will make its way around Europe. What was the proverb? It was, and I quote, "Get dressed, undress, drink, and sleep: these are the skills of the Teutonic Knights" end quote. Ouch!

As the quality of the Knights serving in the Teutonic Order declined, as the internal disputes in the Livonian Chapter of the Order worsened, and as the reputation of the Order headed southwards, local power-players inside Prussia moved in to fill the vacuum left by the increasingly diminished Order. The people of Prussia were totally over the fact that they kept having to pay massive amounts of taxes to the Teutonic Order so they could lose wars and make a spectacle of themselves. In the year 1440, a new organization was formed. It was called the Prussian League. It was formed by an alliance of influential Prussian noblemen, representatives from the twelve Prussian Hanseatic cities, and twelve other towns. Members of the League agreed to assist each other against attacks, and to lobby for policies from which they would all benefit. The main policies which they wished to promote were: lower taxes; the reduction of military levies; and addressing the issue of corruption amongst Prussian and Teutonic administrators.

Grand Master Konrad was fifty years old when he was elected as Grand Master, and his policy overall was one of open arms and conciliation. Whereas Grand Master Paul had caused no end of conflict with his erratic, paranoid, and aggressive behavior, Grand Master Konrad was determined to be Mr Nice Guy. He was sure that, with the right soothing words, the internal rifts inside the Order could be healed, and the Teutonic Order could make peace with the rising power of the Prussian League.

To a limited extent, Grand Master Konrad was able to achieve his aims. He gave a handful of minor concessions to the Prussian League, just enough to make it stop making too much of a fuss, and he managed to resolve the issues of the document still being waved by the German Chapter of the Order, by getting the Papacy to rule that it was a forgery.

However, as William Urban points out, what the Order needed at this point in time, in order to survive, was a total overhaul, to bring it into the current era, which was increasingly seeing demands for the democratic exercising of powers inside states. Instead, Grand Master Konrad chose to look backwards, and did his best to return the Order to its medieval disciplinary roots. So the Grand Master banned dice games and hunting amongst the members of the Order, reaffirmed the Order's commitment to chastity and poverty, and enforced compulsory attendance at Church services, as well as observation of days of fasting. If the Teutonic Order was a man drowning at sea, these policies of the Grand Master kept the man's head above the water. However, the policies didn't operate as a rescue operation designed to save the drowning man, and eventually of course, if left to attempt to stay afloat on his own, without a life-raft, life-saver, or any hope of rescue, a drowning man will perish.

Grand Master Konrad died in the year 1449, and was replaced by his nephew, Ludwig of Erlichshausen. Unlike his uncle, Ludwig was not so much of a Nice Guy, and he started his rule by attempting to eliminate the organization which he believed posed the greatest threat to the Order's power, that organization being, of course, the Prussian League.

Now we should point out at this point in time that Poland and Lithuania aren't currently promoting aggressive policies towards Prussia. Young King Casimir is now ruling both countries and he is concerned mainly with consolidating his hold on power, and not with expanding his Kingdom's borders out into Prussia. So for the Order, the Prussian League, and not Poland or Lithuania, is currently posing the greatest threat.

Grand Master Ludwig and the Order's lawyers examined files relating to the establishment of the Prussian League, and determined that it hadn't been created along the correct legal lines. Accordingly, the Order's lawyers moved to have Rome declare that the Prussian League was an illegal institution which had been operating invalidly. The Prussian League revved up its own lawyers, who of course argued that the League had been validly established. Just in case the Order's lawyers prevailed however, the League also made preparations to take up arms against the Order should it make any move to disband the League.

As the legal dispute dragged on, the Teutonic Order ended up finding an ally in the form of the Papal Legate to the Imperial Court. The Legate was concerned that the growing power of institutions such as the Prussian League would limit the Church's ability to call for Crusades, and since the Turks were still knocking at the door of Latin Christian Europe, the ability of Rome to launch a Crusade needed to be preserved at any cost. The Legate's arguments persuaded the current Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick III, to rule against the Prussian League.

This, in turn, prompted the Prussian league to go on the offensive. Desperate to raise an army before the Teutonic Order had a chance to hire mercenaries, the Prussian league turned to young King Casimir of Poland for assistance. King Casimir was happy to align himself with the League, but wasn't able to spare much by way of military assistance. This didn't seem to be a problem for the League, which managed to foment rebellions across

Prussia. Elbing, Danzig and Thorn fell to the rebels, and the Order's castles and bases in those towns were all destroyed. This heralded the start of the Thirteen Years War, which ran from the year 1450 to 1463.

Initially, it looked like the Thirteen Years War wouldn't run anywhere near thirteen years long. In fact, it looked like it would all be over relatively quickly. More and more Prussian towns fell to the rebels aligned with the Prussian League, until only three towns Marienburg, Stuhm and Konitz remained under the control of the Teutonic Order.

Believing that the Teutonic Order was close to being wiped off the map, and that the Kingdom of Poland was about to bring Prussia under its wing as the rebels of the Prussian League emerged victorious from the conflict, King Casimir, who incidentally had recently married the late Emperor Sigismund's granddaughter Elizabeth of Hungary, decided to go on a victory tour of Prussia. Despite the fact that Casimir was welcomed by cheering crowds and adoring fans in Prussia, and despite the fact that the League's rebels began a siege of Marienburg while Casimir was doing his victory lap, it was a little too early to declare "mission accomplished".

What King Casimir and the Prussian League didn't realize was that Grand Master Ludwig was successfully embarking on a massive mercenary recruitment drive, and that in fact 15,000 paid troops were currently assembling on Prussia's doorstep, ready to race in and save the day for the Teutonic Order.

Inside Prussia, the Order's men were also attempting to push back against the League, led by none other than our old friend Heinrich Reuss von Plauen, of "Oops, I accidentally executed a bunch of hostages" fame from Episode 307. Heinrich Reuss von Plauen had been holding out in the fortress at Konitz, one of the few Prussian towns not to have fallen to the rebels. He led his men in a successful attack on some Royal Polish troops who had attempted to take Konitz, and over the next few months the Order, with the assistance of men like Heinrich Reuss von Plauen and the 15,000 fighting men they had hired, managed to retake some of the towns which had fallen to the rebels.

But the Order didn't have enough men to completely defeat the Prussian League. The Prussian League also didn't have enough men to push back against the resurgent Order and force its defeat. With neither side having the means to defeat the other, the conflict dragged on for thirteen years.

By the time the wars were nearing their end, there was a new Pope in place. Interestingly, the Papal Legate to the Imperial Court who had assisted the Order to take action against the Prussian League, was the man elevated to the Papacy, becoming Pope Pius II in 1458. Poor Grand Master Ludwig was captured by the rebels in Danzig and taken prisoner, but managed to escape to Konigsberg. He transferred the official residence of the Grand Master to Konigsberg, where it will remain for the rest of the Order's existence.

By the time the 1460's rolled around, everyone was getting pretty sick of the war. Trade was being disrupted, and no one had any money left to pay mercenaries. Then, in the year 1463, the League's navy destroyed the Order's entire fleet of ships. Grand Master Ludwig finally saw the writing on the wall, and in the year 1466 the Grand Master signed a peace treaty known as the Second Peace of Thorn.

The Second Peace of Thorn basically sounded the death-knell for the Teutonic Order. Under the terms of the treaty, the Order agreed to hand Pomerelia and Kulm to the Kingdom of Poland, along with the cities of Marienburg, Elbing, and Christburg. The Order agreed to cut its ties to the Holy Roman Empire become a vassal of the Polish crown, and as a final humiliation, at least half of all its new recruits were to be Polish citizens. The Teutonic Order will limp on, but as a shadow of its former self.

Join me next week as we wrap everything up in our final episode on the Baltic Crusades. Until next week, bye for now.

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