

History of the Crusades. Episode 300. How did that happen? The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part V. Samogitia Erupts.

Hello again. Last week we saw relations between the Teutonic Order and Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania deteriorate, following the failure of Vytautas to take Moscow and the subsequent imprisonment by Vytautas of the Order's former ally Svitrigaila. The deterioration of this alliance came at the same time as an alarming rise in unrest in Samogitia, as the taxation obligations imposed by the Order on the Samogitians saw anti-German sentiment in the region increase. While Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen was nervously wondering whether Vytautas was about to prompt the Samogitians into another full scale uprising, King Jogaila of Poland decided to pile on more pressure by encouraging Rome to push the Teutonic Order into campaigns far away from the Baltic region, and by amping up claims by the Kingdom of Poland for contested lands in the border regions and in Pomerelia. Wisely, Grand Master Ulrich looked at this situation and decided that he'd better start preparing for war. He offloaded Gotland onto a satisfied Queen Margaret and commenced a series of rapid castle building and castle improving projects across Samogitia.

Now, all may have been well, and war may have been prevented, if not for some extreme weather, which occurred during 1408, and the Grand Master's unfortunate reactions to the events which followed. The winter of 1407 to 1408 was unusually long, with cold, snowy weather remaining well into April of 1408. This meant that the growing season for 1408 would be dangerously short. Seeds need warmth to germinate, and planting a seed into cold ground is just going to be a pointless, seed-wasting exercise, so across the Baltic region, fields of wheat and rye, which were the staple crops for the area, were sown unusually late. Now, the growing season in this cold climate was already quite short, and everyone sat around crossing their fingers that hopefully the summer season would also be unusually long to give the plants time to grow and mature enough to enable them to be harvested. But this didn't happen. In fact, not only was summer the normal length but it was also unusually dry, meaning that the harvest across the Baltic region was absolutely woeful.

Now this wouldn't have been a complete disaster if the local people had been able to import grain from other regions to make up for the shortfall, but the large scale nature of the famine meant that the price of imported grain rose steeply, far out of the reach of the pockets of most people. For the Samogitians the situation was compounded by the fact that they were still required to pay taxes to the Teutonic order, despite the fact that farmers had received barely any income from their failed harvests, and the fact that most people were desperately trying to scrape enough money together to buy enough grain to get them through the next winter. So, faced with almost certain starvation, many Samogitians decided that they needed to take action, with some of the more popular remedies being to flee Samogitia to try to find somewhere with cheaper food, or to attack the Teutonic Order's strongholds in Samogitia, whose stores of grain were temptingly full, with enough supplies to feed their garrisons through the colder months.

This whole situation, understandably, was making Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen exceedingly nervous. Samogitia looked like it was just about to explode into a full-blown revolt once again, and the Grand Master's priority was to stop this from happening by any means possible. Of course, one way the Grand Master could have released a bit of the pressure in the cooker which was Samogitia would have been to temporarily ease the tax burden, and to arrange for shipments of grain to be sent to the region, to be distributed

amongst the Samogitian people. But Grand Master Ulrich didn't do this. No, instead Grand Master Ulrich dealt with the matter in quite possibly the worst way imaginable.

The famine in the region had extended to Lithuania, so the King of Poland was helpfully doing his best to alleviate the suffering of the Lithuanian people by working with Vytautas to provide shiploads of Polish grain to Lithuania. The Grand Master somehow formed the view that these grain imports could be used to assist an uprising in Samogitia. Perhaps, thought an increasingly paranoid Grand Master Ulrich, these shipments of grain weren't destined for Lithuania at all, but would be diverted to Samogitia. In fact, thought Grand Master Ulrich, as he gasped with the audacity of it all, perhaps there was a stack of weapons hidden inside those shiploads of grain, ready to be smuggled into Samogitia to both feed and arm a Samogitian uprising against the Teutonic order.

A furious Grand Master Ulrich then ordered that all shipments of grain on Polish ships bound for Lithuania were to be stopped and thoroughly searched for illegal contraband. The officials from the Teutonic Order were told exactly what they should be looking for, so I guess it wasn't such a surprise when a report made its way to Grand Master Ulrich that yes, a particularly diligent Teutonic officer had actually found weapons concealed inside some of the containers carrying Polish grain. As William Urban points out in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", the officer claimed to have found weapons, but no one knows to this day whether or not any weapons were actually located. Still, it was enough to fire the Grand Master into action. He ordered that all shipments of grain into Lithuania and Samogitia cease immediately, and that all the cargo and the vessels carrying the cargo were to be confiscated by the Order. The Grand Master then informed a furious King Jogaila and Grand Duke Vytautas that they could have their grain and their ships back once they had subdued the increasingly angry Samogitians.

Now, had Grand Master Ulrich been in a calmer, less paranoid state of mind, he might have been able to see that he had just placed the Lithuanians in an impossible situation, and instead of preventing an uprising in Samogitia, he had likely just ignited the spark which would set the dry kindling of discontent across Samogitia into an inferno. By blocking all shipments of grain into Lithuania, the Grand Master had placed Lithuania at risk of starvation. Instead of starving, angry Samogitians turning to calm, healthy Lithuanians for assistance, starving, angry Samogitians were now uniting with starving, angry Lithuanians, and the target of all of their anger and outrage was the Teutonic Order.

The conflict started off with a propaganda campaign waged by both sides. Vytautas accused the Grand Master of failing to administer Samogitia competently and of failing to Christianize the majority of the Samogitians. This was actually a valid point. The Teutonic Order's strongholds in Samogitia were all located on the Nemunas River, and the clerics weren't all that keen to stray too far from the safety of the strongholds. As a result, the area adjacent to the Nemunas River had been Christianized, but across the rest of Samogitia, Christianization had been patchy at best. In response, the Grand Master angrily accused Vytautas of secretly harboring pagan sympathies. In fact, the Grand Master pointed out, he wouldn't be at all surprised if Vytautas turned his back on the Latin Christian religion altogether, then joined with the pagan Samogitians and his Russian Orthodox buddies from the Russian Principalities to invade and conquer that shining light of Latin Christianity in the Baltic region, Prussia. As such, alleged the Grand Master, the very existence of Latin Christianity in the Baltic region could now be under threat.

As both men were reeling from the epic burns they had just inflicted upon each other, the Grand Master seemed to pull back a little, and made peaceful, soothing noises in Lithuania's direction. Grand Duke Vytautas rejected these overtures though, and instead made preparations to assist the Samogitians to, once again, rise up against their Teutonic oppressors. What happened next was a massive Samogitian uprising, an event which took no one by surprise except, strangely, the man charged with administering Samogitia for the Teutonic Order, Michael Kuchmeister.

Now I don't know whether there were memos circulating which failed to have Michael Kuchmeister on their distribution lists, or if the governor of Samogitia had been caught napping, but William Urban reports in his book "The Last Years of The Teutonic Knights" that most Germans in Samogitia, from the merchants to the fishermen to the officials from the Teutonic Order, had been acting like the whole famine-taxation-rebellion thing was just a little bit of unhappiness which would soon blow over. As a result, the Order's castles in Samogitia weren't battle-ready, and some of them weren't even properly garrisoned, so the rebellion, when it struck, was devastatingly successful. William Urban reports that the rebels burned the outbuildings of Christmemel castle, stole a bunch of horses, and abducted all the Germans they could find. Other castles were attacked and raided, and a siege was commenced at Friedeburg Castle.

Vytautas surfaced in Samogitia in April of 1409, then disappeared, and then reappeared in May. In August, he materialized once more, and made a brief appearance at the ongoing siege at Friedeberg. Then he disappeared again. As William Urban observes in regards to the various mysterious sightings of Vytautas in Samogitia at this time, and I quote "no one knew what that meant" end quote. Was Vytautas actively assisting the rebellion, or was he just popping over to observe what was taking place in Samogitia? No one had any idea.

Grand Master Ulrich's response to the uprising was to initially do quite a bit of hand-wringing, then he managed to recruit 200 German knights, whom he dispatched to Samogitia in the wildly optimistic hope that they would be able to defeat the Samogitians. This led Michael Kuchmeister to form the view that perhaps the Grand Master was unaware of the seriousness of the situation so, leaving the Teutonic strongholds to fend for themselves for the time being, Michael Kuchmeister left Samogitia and traveled to Prussia to personally brief Grand Master Ulrich on the extent of the rebellion.

When Michael Kuchmeister met with the Grand Master, he actually found him in full-blown crisis mode. The Teutonic order had only managed to quell all the previous uprisings in Samogitia with the assistance of Poland and Lithuania. However now, due to the Grand Master's mis-steps, not only were Poland and Lithuania unavailable to assist the Order in Samogitia, they may even be assisting the rebel Samogitians, so the Grand Master needed a major influx of manpower from somewhere, and he needed it quickly. As a result, Michael Kuchmeister was ordered to travel to the Kingdom of Hungary to see whether Sigismund could find his way to send a rather large army to Samogitia as soon as possible, if he wouldn't mind, and at the same time, the Grand Master requested Jogaila to send some Polish representatives to Prussia, to see if some sort of arrangement could be reached about the Samogitian situation.

If the Grand master had hoped to lure Poland back into the Teutonic fold, he must have been sorely disappointed, as the main message to come from the Archbishop of Gniezno, who headed the Polish delegation, was that the Teutonic order should not even contemplate invading Lithuania, as the Kingdom of Poland would view an attack on

Lithuania to be equivalent to an attack on its own Kingdom, and would respond accordingly. After this piece of theatrical chest-thumping, all three players, Poland, Lithuania, and the Teutonic Order, were now preparing themselves to go to war.

The outright rejection of the out-held hand of Teutonic conciliation by Poland at these negotiations seemed to have caused Grand Master Ulrich to switch priorities. Despite having just reached the conclusion that the Order desperately needed to throw fighting men at Samogitia to quell the uprising, Grand Master Ulrich now focused his anger on Poland. At considerable expense, the Grand Master hired 800 mercenary troops from Silesia, then ordered them not to travel to Samogitia to put down the rebellion - no, for reasons known only to himself, the Grand Master decided that these troops would be best utilized in an attack on the Kingdom of Poland.

Now you may well be scratching your heads at this moment, trying to work out what on earth the Grand Master was up to. Well, you aren't the only one. Over the centuries, quite a few heads have been scratched, as historians have tried to analyze the Grand Master's strategy here, and to try to work out what he was thinking and what he was trying to achieve. In his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", William Urban speculates that perhaps the Grand Master believed that if the Order invaded Poland and forced Jogaila to back away from the conflict, then maybe that would take some of the wind out of the Samogitian uprising, which would then just simmer down of its own accord. That may well have been Ulrich's strategy, but we'll never know for sure. Did this strategy work? No, it didn't.

It started off somewhat promisingly. When the Order made its formal declaration of war against the Kingdom of Poland, Jogaila was off hunting, and was totally out of the range of any communications. Not even his close advisers knew how to contact him, so it's safe to say that King Jogaila was not expecting his Kingdom to come under attack at this time. The Teutonic Order and their paid-up mercenaries invaded Poland ten days later, and still no one could locate King Jogaila, who was happily amusing himself killing wild animals, blissfully unaware of the crisis. By the time Jogaila had been located and hauled out of the Polish forests, the Marshall of the Teutonic Order had set fire to the castle at Dobrin, Grand Master Ulrich was occupied besieging a Polish castle, a bunch of towns in Great Poland had come under attack, and Mazovia was also taking hits.

Will the Kingdom of Poland manage to push back against this Teutonic invasion? You'll have to tune in next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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