

History of the Crusades. Episode 316. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XXII. The Great Conference of 1427.

Hello again. Last week we saw hostilities break out once again in the Baltic region on two fronts. The first involved an attack on the Hussites by the combined Imperial and Teutonic Order forces, which ended up being successfully repelled by the Hussites and their surprise military commander, a Lithuanian man called Korybutas, who also happened to be Jogaila's nephew. The second round of hostilities occurred when the combined Polish and Lithuanian forces invaded Prussia, a move which resulted in a negotiated peace settlement which took place at Lake Melno.

The Peace of Lake Melno, as it later became known, was a spectacular victory for King Jogaila of Poland, who managed to manipulate the negotiations to secure the outcome he desired, while also managing to convince the other stakeholders in the process, Emperor Sigismund, Grand Master Paul of Rusdorf, and Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania, that they were leaving the negotiations as winners, and not as victims of some pretty impressive back dealing and diplomatic sleights of hand by the King of Poland.

Despite every delegate feeling that they had left Lake Melno as a winner, every delegate was also left with the not-so-happy realization that the Kingdom of Poland was beginning to dominate the political scene. This shift in the power politics of the region ended up having some interesting consequences. You might remember that King Jogaila had recently remarried. His new wife, Sophia, may well end up producing the son which Jogaila desperately needed to fix his succession problems.

You may also remember that at this point in time, Jogaila's only living child is his attractive, smart, apple-of-her-father's-eye daughter Jadwiga. Jadwiga had recently been betrothed to an eight year old German Prince, Frederick II of Hohenzollern. Young Friedrich was to spend the rest of his childhood in Poland, learning the Polish language and Polish ways, so that should he become the next King of Poland he would have some idea about what he was doing.

The thought of this German Prince possibly inheriting Lithuania along with Poland was giving Grand Duke Vytautas all sorts of nightmares. Of course, if Jogaila's new young wife Sophia bore him sons, then Prince Friedrich wouldn't become the next King of Poland, but the whole succession issue is making Vytautas rather worried. Of course, this whole issue is in the spotlight because Jogaila and Vytautas are currently aged in their seventies, and Jogaila is Vytautas' heir. Upon Vytautas' death, Jogaila will become the ruler of Lithuania, with Jogaila's heirs ruling both Poland and Lithuania. Vytautas is concerned that Poland is too close to the Latin Christian Church and too close to the Holy Roman Empire, and that should a Polish ruler attempt to govern Lithuania following Vytautas' death, the experience may well end up being a complete disaster.

The problem was that, whereas Poland was close to the Latin Christian Church and the Holy Roman Empire, Lithuania's ties and allegiances lay more to the east. Support for the Orthodox Church was strong in Lithuania, and the politics of the Russian Principalities dominated Lithuanian affairs. There was also a degree of disquiet across Lithuania that the Kingdom of Poland had never really fully acknowledged or rewarded the role Lithuania had played in the battle of Tannenberg, so, for all these reasons, and with the power of the Kingdom of Poland apparently increasing by the minute, Grand Duke Vytautas started quietly shifting Lithuania away from Poland.

To successfully create some distance between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania though, Lithuania needed a powerful new regional ally. Unfortunately, there weren't many of those to choose from. It was pretty clear that Emperor Sigismund and the Latin Christian Church were firmly in the Polish camp, so the only possible ally left standing was the Teutonic Order.

Now, you may think that a sudden increasing of friendship and ties between the Teutonic Order and Lithuania would be a pretty bizarre turn of events, yet that's what happened. Grand Master Paul and Grand Duke Vytautas appeared to hit it off on a personal level following the Peace of Lake Melno, and the two men exchanged gifts to cement their new friendship, with Vytautas sending the Grand Master falcons and hunting dogs, with an undertaking that he would soon send six Tartar slaves to Prussia. In return, the Grand Master sent Vytautas some wine, a warhorse, a golden helmet, a silver necklace, and some jewelry for his wife. When Vytautas was content that his new alliance was secure, he rode off to the Russian Principalities, eventually declaring war on both Pskov and Novgorod.

A couple of years later, in the year 1424, the Polish-Lithuanian succession issues took a new turn, as Sophia gave birth to a healthy son, Wladislaw, who was actually the first male heir born in the Kingdom of Poland for over a hundred years, so this was a big deal. Sofia followed this feat by giving birth to another two baby boys in quick succession, but only one of them lived, baby Casimir. So now King Jogaila has an heir and a spare.

However, this didn't solve Poland's succession problems; it actually exacerbated them for a while. The birth of the two boys was not being celebrated by fans of Jogaila's daughter Jadwiga inside the royal court, and even more importantly it was not being celebrated by the powerful supporters of the Holy Roman Empire. Emperor Sigismund had been pretty satisfied with the idea of a German Prince, young Friedrich, one day occupying the Polish throne, but now those plans were in total disarray, with the realization that Jogaila's two baby sons would replace Jadwiga and Frederick in the line of succession.

Probably not coincidentally, rumors began to circulate that Sophia had taken a number of lovers, and the paternity of the two baby boys was therefore in question. Sophia was forced to swear an oath that she hadn't been unfaithful. Then, for good measure, Jogaila rounded up the four knights who had been the subject of the rumors about his wife's infidelity and had them imprisoned, for the rest of their lives. Support for Friedrich and Jadwiga's claim to the throne continued to gain traction though, until the year 1431, when Jadwiga died, suddenly and unexpectedly. Rumors circulated that Sophia had arranged for her to be poisoned to secure her son's succession to the Polish crown, but those rumors were never substantiated.

While the Polish succession issues were playing out, and while Grand Duke Vytautas and Grand Master Paul were playing footsies under the table, Emperor Sigismund decided to delegate a German Prince with the responsibility of negotiating with the Hussites, while he, Emperor Sigismund, rode off to deal with a major looming problem, the Turks. The Turks at the moment were effectively knocking at the door of Europe, and the particular door they were knocking on was the Kingdom of Hungary, so Emperor Sigismund raced eastwards to beat the pesky Turks back from the door of his Kingdom.

Emperor Sigismund was, of course, entirely correct to be concerned about the danger posed by the rise of the Ottoman Turks. The Ottomans aim, at this point in time, was to conquer the remains of the declining Byzantine Empire and to push into the Christian Balkan states. Ottoman fortunes were currently undergoing a revival under its latest Sultan Mehmed I, and the successive incursions by the Ottoman Turks into Christian territory under the leadership of Sultan Mehmed I was something the powers of Europe clearly needed to address.

With this in mind, Grand Duke Vytautas decided to show some initiative by convening a massive conference inside Lubart's castle at Lutsk in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in January of the year 1427. This gathering would later become known as the "Great Conference of 1427" and, according to William Urban in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", the conference was, and I quote "one of the most splendid gatherings of notables in East Central European history" end quote.

The conference aimed to focus the minds of all interested parties on the Turkish threat, with the goal of coming up with a coherent and agreed policy to both defend the Balkans and the steppe region from a Turkish invasion, and to hopefully rescue the remains of the Byzantine Empire and the city of Constantinople from the Turkish threat.

The number of people the conference brought together was staggering. In attendance was King Jogaila, Emperor Sigismund, and a bunch of leaders from the Russian Principalities, including a number of Tartar Khans who were currently vying for power. The Balkans were fully represented, the Byzantine ambassador was there, as were representatives from the Teutonic Order, the Papacy, and even electors from the Kingdom of Germany. The decision to hold the conference in January meant that the rivers, swamps and roads in the region would all be frozen solid, meaning the travelers could make the journey to the conference without too much trouble. As such, the number of important personages, knights, clergymen, and servants who arrived to attend the conference was truly staggering.

The exact number of people who ended up attending the conference isn't clear, but to give you an idea, here is the amount of food the gathering ate each day at the conference. According to William Urban, to feed all the people attending the conference required 700 oxen, 1400 sheep, 100 bison and boars, and 700 barrels of mead, plus beer and wine. And let me just emphasize again, that was per day. So there were a lot of people there, a lot of hungry, thirsty people.

But the attendees weren't there just to eat, drink, and be merry. No, a lot of important matters were raised at the meeting, which would end up running for a period of thirteen weeks, and a great deal of political maneuvering was taking place, with both Vytautas and Emperor Sigismund keen to not only confront the looming Turkish threat, but to come up with some strategies which may rein in the rising star which was King Jogaila of Poland. As such, one of the proposals made by Emperor Sigismund was that the Teutonic Order move itself out of Prussia and base itself in the Balkans, thereby providing an extra speed-hump for the Turks to traverse. Everyone expected King Jogaila to support this move, but instead he vehemently opposed it, stating that the Kingdom of Poland was intending to march its armies eastwards to confront the Turks, and it didn't want the Teutonic Order getting in its way.

If this seems like a strange reaction to a proposal which would leave Prussia virtually undefended should Poland invaded once again, well, that's because King Jogaila likely realized what the actual play was here. What was the actual play? Well, Emperor Sigismund had apparently come to the conclusion that having a strong, independent state of Lithuania, which was able to come out from under the protective wing of Poland, would be a very handy thing. So Emperor Sigismund was proposing policies which would result in a strengthened Lithuania surrounded by allies such as the Teutonic Order, the Kingdom of Hungary, and the Kingdom of Bohemia. Should he be able to achieve this, Sigismund believed that it would reduce any outside support flowing to the Hussites from Lithuania, and would encourage Poland to focus westwards, on the Kingdom of Germany and Prussia, while leaving Lithuania free to turn its attentions more to the east.

To boost his strategy, Emperor Sigismund also publicly voiced his support for seeking approval from Rome to elevate the Grand Duchy of Lithuania into the Kingdom of Lithuania, thereby earning Vytautas a crown and making him the equal of King Jogaila of Poland. If King Jogaila was isolated enough and dis-empowered enough by these moves, Emperor Sigismund believed that he had a chance of forcing the Kingdom of Poland to, at long last, become subordinate to the Holy Roman Empire.

Unfortunately for Emperor Sigismund and Vytautas though, this plan ended up backfiring spectacularly. At the end of the Great Conference of 1427, Emperor Sigismund met with the leaders of the Hussite movement, but instead of convincing them to lay down their weapons and agree to a truce, as Sigismund had hoped, his moves ended up prompting the Hussites to go on the offensive. With the Kingdom of Bohemia about to erupt into warfare once again, Emperor Sigismund then attempted to convince Grand Master Paul to cement his friendship with Lithuania by attacking the Kingdom of Poland. Grand Master Paul felt some disquiet about this proposal though, and was concerned that it may result in Prussia being leveled by Poland, once again. So instead he approached King Jogaila, told him what Emperor Sigismund had planned, and offered not to invade Poland in exchange for some territory in the border lands. The Grand Master was then forced to patch up his relationship with Vytautas, who was not terribly pleased about the Order's approaches to Poland.

In a desperate attempt to stop his plans from unraveling completely, Emperor Sigismund then approached Rome, with a view to obtaining support from Pope Martin V for Vytautas' coronation. Pope Martin, though, was far from convinced that this was a good idea. Rome's priorities at this point in time were to defeat the Hussites, promote unity between the Latin Christian and Orthodox Churches, and to confront the Turkish threat. Creating new monarchies was a pretty rare event, and Pope Martin V was having trouble being persuaded that creating another kingdom was entirely necessary.

The tepid support of the Pope for the creation of a Lithuanian crown, and the various train-wrecks Emperor Sigismund was causing in his attempts to clear the path for the rise of the Kingdom of Lithuania, did nothing to dissuade Vytautas though. In fact, the more obstacles were placed in the way of Grand Duke Vytautas becoming King Vytautas, the more obsessed and focused Vytautas appeared to become in his quest to score himself a crown. Vytautas ended up deciding that, come hell or high water, he would hold his coronation in the summer of the year 1430, and nothing and no one was going to stop him from becoming the first King of Lithuania.

Join me next week as Grand Duke Vytautas does his utmost to achieve his dream. 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