

History of the Crusades. Episode 310. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XV. A New Grand Master.

Hello again. Last week we saw the new Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund host a lengthy conference with the parties to the First Peace of Thorn, in an attempt to settle all the outstanding commitments made under the treaty, the most significant of these being the payment of the final installment of the war indemnity by the Teutonic Order. While Grand Master Heinrich stayed behind in Marienburg, praying for a favorable outcome to be negotiated by the delegates he sent to the conference, Emperor Sigismund, King Jogaila of Poland, and Grand Duke Vytautas spent a lengthy amount of time bonding together over the negotiation sessions, with bouts of hunting, tournaments, and feasting making the process more palatable. While progress was made on finalizing the Peace of Thorn, and while the Teutonic Order did manage to come up with the funds to make the final payment to Poland, the most significant outcome from the conference was the bond which appeared to form between Emperor Sigismund, King Jogaila, and Grand Duke Vytautas, with all three men agreeing not to aid each other's enemies at the conclusion of the meetings.

Now, you would think that the Teutonic Order would be pleased that the debt had finally been paid, and that King Jogaila would be pleased that a massive amount of melted silver and wads of cash was now sitting in his treasury. But no, this wasn't the case. There were rumblings of discontent being voiced inside the Teutonic Order about the fact that this large sum had just been handed over, with no real effort having been made to reduce or re-negotiate the amount. And oddly, Jogaila wasn't really happy either. He would have preferred to have been paid by way of the Order transferring territory or castles to Poland, instead of the Order handing over bags of money, which Jogaila really had little use for.

Grand Duke Vytautas found a good use however, for the share of the funds which King Jogaila sent his way. He used it to finance a commissioner to settle the issue of the borders of Samogitia once and for all. And wouldn't you know it? The commissioner hired by Vytautas ended up deciding the matter in Vytautas' favor. As William Urban states in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", and I quote "In the end, the commissioner relied on recommendations from Vytautas and the exiled Bishop of Ermland in awarding all disputed lands to Lithuania. Although this ignored every definition of Samogitia's borders since 1252, this border remained unchanged until the year 1919." End quote.

Grand Duke Vytautas decided to celebrate this outcome by waging war against Novgorod, and Grand Master Heinrich decided that he would respond to this development by preparing to go to war against the Kingdom of Poland.

Having risen to lofty heights as the savior of both the Teutonic Order and Prussia, Grand Master Heinrich's star now seemed to be in a bit of a free-fall. Public opinion inside both Prussia and the Order seemed to be turning against him, and the Grand Master decided that the best way to reverse this trend would be to prepare for a military confrontation with Poland, which would reverse the Polish and Lithuanian victory at Tannenberg, and have people cheering and shouting his name in the streets once again. So he called on both the Livonian Master of the Order and the German Master to send men to Prussia. Once those men had arrived in Prussia, he was ready to make his move.

Now, the trouble with this show of military initiative by the Grand Master was that most sensible people inside Prussia and the Teutonic Order could see that declaring war on

Poland at this point in time would be a really, really bad idea. The Order had been all but wiped out on the fields outside Tannenberg, and launching an offensive against Poland with a depleted and inexperienced army seemed like a recipe for disaster. The Grand Master, though, was certain that this course of action was the correct one to take, so he sent 6,000 men to Pomerania, and further 15,000 to the borderlands in Dobrin and Mazovia. Before he could lead the troops out of these positions into Poland, however, the Grand Master was struck down with an illness which confined him to his bed. Not wishing to let the moment go to waste, he ordered Marshall Michael Kuchmeister to invade Poland on his behalf, which the Marshall did, slashing and burning his way through the Polish border settlements while encountering little resistance from the local peasants.

Despite his success though, the Marshall's heart was just not in this invasion. He was one of the many, many men inside the Teutonic Order who believed that this offensive move by the Grand Master was a massive miscalculation, and that when King Jogaila finally noticed what was going on and moved to counter the invasion, then the Order's forces would likely be smashed and annihilated once again. Marshall Michael Kuchmeister called an emergency meeting with his subordinates in the field, and they ended up agreeing that continuing the invasion was madness. So the Marshall made the bold move of ordering the Teutonic Order to fall back and withdraw out of Poland.

When the Grand Master was told about what had happened, he was absolutely furious. He staggered out of his sick bed and set a date for the convening of a meeting of the Grand Chapter of the Order, so that the insubordination of the Marshall could be discussed at the highest levels. Then the Grand Master began working his contacts and drumming up support for his position amongst the people who would be attending the meeting. If a person was impertinent enough to express support for Michael Kuchmeister during these discussions, then the Grand Master threatened them with reprisals until they changed their position. He ignored the Marshall's requests that the two men meet to discuss their differences. He upped his bodyguard detail, then went back to bed as another wave of illness hit him.

Five days before the General Chapter meeting was due to convene, on the 9th of October 1413, the Marshall of the Teutonic Order, Michael Kuchmeister, made his move. Accompanied by some armed supporters, he forced his way into the Grand Master's residence at Marienburg and confronted the ill Grand Master, who was still bedridden. William Urban points out that many of the Knights in the Teutonic Order likely disagreed with this undignified ousting of the recent savior of the Order, Heinrich of Plauen, but there were not enough Grand Master Heinrich supporters inside Marienburg to physically oppose the Marshall when he made his move. There was also the fact that many Knights, believing that the Grand Master might not have long to live anyway due to his illness, didn't want to risk the Order descending into civil war, so they frowned, made unhappy noises, then stood aside as the Marshall toppled the Grand Master.

When the Grand Chapter of the Order convened five days later, Michael Kuchmeister addressed the meeting and did his best to justify his actions. Then, to reinforce the fact that he hadn't acted out of personal ambition, he pushed for the Grand Commander of the Order, Hermann Gans, to be installed as the acting Grand Master until the matter of who would be installed as the actual Grand Master could be finally settled. The matter was finally settled a few months later, in January of 1414. The deposed Grand Master Heinrich von Plauen, having recovered sufficiently from his illness to appear at the meeting, tendered his resignation and was then sent to his new posting, an insignificant outpost, far

far away from Marienburg in Prussia's south-west. Heinrich's most vocal supporter, his cousin Heinrich Reuss von Plauen also found himself being relocated to a distant, humble, and harmless outpost. Then Michael Kuchmeister found himself being elected unanimously as the new Grand Master.

Grand Master Michael's first move as the new peace-maker head of the Teutonic Order was to dismiss all the mercenaries hired by Heinrich von Plauen. Then he made overtures towards King Jogaila and Grand Duke Vytautas, with a view to coming to some sort of permanent peace agreement based on the Peace of Thorn. To the new Grand Master's shock and disappointment though, he found Jogaila to be not only uninterested in coming to any permanent peace with the new leader of the Teutonic Order, he was actually antagonistic and belligerent. In fact, King Jogaila seemed to be intent on going out of his way to make everything as difficult as possible for Grand Master Michael Kuchmeister.

And actually this was exactly Jogaila's aim. There was nothing Jogaila despised more than a traitor and a turncoat, and as a result, the first condition demanded by Poland as a precursor to the re-opening of peace talks was the reinstatement of Heinrich of Plauen to the position of Grand Master, a demand which led a nervous Grand Master Michael, fearful that the former Grand Master may stage a comeback, to arrest Heinrich of Plauen. That of course made King Jogaila despise the new Grand Master even more.

King Jogaila did eventually agreed to meet with Grand Master Michael in April of 1414, but when the Grand Master arrived at a place near Thorn where the meeting was scheduled to occur, he found a large Polish and Lithuanian army waiting for him. With this sign of aggression being an ominous start to the talks, the Grand Master and the King of Poland met to open the discussions. The Grand Master began with a passionate speech about how Grand Master Heinrich had been standing in the way of a lasting and permanent peace in the region, but that he, Grand Master Michael, wished to see Poland, Lithuania, and Prussia move forward together in a display of regional unity and peaceful co-existence. King Jogaila responded by saying something to the effect of "Okay then. What about you hand over Samogitia Poland and Lithuania completely, and not merely temporarily as was the case under the current terms of the Peace of Thorn." The Grand Master umm'd and ahh'd, but after three hours of discussion, he was on the verge of giving the green light to this proposal. Then Jogaila decided to throw in a few more demands. He stated that the Teutonic Order would also need to hand Kulm and Pomerelia over to Poland, and make another payment of the war indemnity.

It dawned upon the Grand Master at this moment, or shortly afterwards, that King Jogaila was just toying with him and that Poland and Lithuania really had no desire to enter into genuine peace negotiations. After the talks were abandoned, a deeply disappointed Grand Master Michael realized that, if no permanent peace between Prussia and its neighbors was possible, then realistically, the Grand Master was now going to be forced to do what he had toppled his predecessor for. It was time to start preparing for war.

This, it turned out, was easier said than done. He had sent all the mercenaries home and now had to dig deep into the Order's limited coffers to find the funds to attempt to re-hire the mercenaries, many of whom had managed to find employment elsewhere. With the Order's forces still dangerously depleted, and with not enough mercenaries employed to fill the gaps, the Grand Master decided to concentrate his forces in just one region, so he moved his army into Kulm, a place which Jogaila had expressed a particular interest in at the recent talks, and a place which had surrendered worryingly quickly to the Kingdom of

Poland following the Battle of Tannenberg. In response, King Jogaila moved the Polish forces towards Kulm and attempted to besiege a number of strongholds along the border to gain a foothold into the region.

However, when the Grand Master successfully blocked this strategy, Jogaila ordered his army to march eastwards. It met up with the Lithuanian forces. Then, in a major case of déjà-vu, the combined Polish Lithuanian armies entered Prussia along the same route as they had taken prior to Tannenberg, and then made their way all the way inland to Osterode.

Now, unfortunately for the Grand Master, all he could really do was to monitor the progress of the army and chew his fingernails anxiously. Both King Jogaila and the Grand Master knew that the Order's forces had been much reduced since that fateful day at Tannenberg, and both King Jogaila and the Grand Master knew that if the Teutonic Order confronted the combined Polish and Lithuanian forces in another pitched battle, it would likely result in another Tannenberg situation. So the Teutonic Order was powerless to stop the invading army as it marched through Prussia.

And that was really bad news for the Prussian people. The Lithuanian contingent of the army didn't contain a huge number of Lithuanian fighters. It mostly consisted of Russian and Tartar fighters. The Tartars in particular seemed to relish the reputation they had developed amongst the Prussian people for depravity, cruelty and destruction, so they set about confirming that reputation and building upon it. As the invading force moved out of Osterode and made its way northwards towards the Prussian coast, the Tartar fighters forced their way into dwellings, raping, murdering and burning as they went. In response, King Jogaila threw his hands up into the air and let it be known that he couldn't control the Tartars and their excesses, in the hope that the resulting death and destruction would force the Grand Master into a military confrontation.

Join me next week, as the Polish-Lithuanian invasion turns into a really unsavory conflict which has become known as the "Hunger War". 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