



**William Urban.** *The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights: Lithuania, Poland and the Teutonic Order.* London: Greenhill Books, 2018. xi + 324 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78438-357-2.

Professor William Urban continues his works on the Baltic crusades and the Teutonic Order with this new publication which introduces the reader to the history of East-Central Europe in the 14th through 16th centuries through colourful personalities from Poland, Lithuania, Bohemia, and Hungary. However, the main focus of this volume is no doubt the religious military order of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia. The work is best described as a political-military study. It is divided into thirteen chapters. The first three chapters introduce the reader to the political arena of the late 14th and the first decade of the 15th centuries. In chapters 4–7, the author focuses on the battle of Tannenberg (1410) and its aftermath: the Peace of Thorn (1411), the Council of Constance (1414–1418), and the Treaty of Melno (1422). Urban then shifts the narrative to the internal and external affairs of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Poland, focusing on the events following the deaths of Grand Duke Vytautas and King Jagiełło (chapter 8). The Teutonic Order receives more attention in chapters 9–12 with regard to various topics: the Hussites; the Thirteen-Years War; relations with its neighbours, and lastly the influence of the Reformation on the Order and other polities. Chapter 13 serves as a conclusion, attempting to answer the question regarding the decline of the Teutonic Order and the changes to the ideology of the crusades. It must be noted that this publication, as the author describes it in the preface, is actually “an adaptation of *Tannenberg and After*” (p. vii) – a book written almost two decades ago.<sup>1</sup> Thus, this book should not be treated as entirely new since the content is almost identical to the older book.

Limited to three hundred pages, the author shows great effort to write not just about the Teutonic Order but also about Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, especially during important changes in the region when the balance of power shifted after the famous battle of Tannenberg in the summer of 1410. Urban’s excellent skills in writing are unquestionable, especially his way of connecting secondary literature with sources of different languages. Nevertheless, the author sometimes loses control of all the information he has gathered, trying to fit

<sup>1</sup> William Urban, *Tannenberg and After: Lithuania, Poland, and the Teutonic Order in Search of Immortality* (Chicago: Lithuanian Research and Studies Center, 1999; rev. ed. 2002).

in every bit of detail that is not relevant to the topic. Throughout the volume, the author constantly repeats details from previous chapters, for example emphasizing Sigismund Luxembourg's lust for women (pp. 9, 23, 68, etc.) or that Władysław Jagiełło loved hunting more than anything else (pp. 79, 102, 149, 214). In doing so, the author pays too much attention to the vivid images of personal traits that are not germane to the topic of the chapters. A strong lack of consistency, even in a book for a general audience, leaves a bad impression, especially when similar points have been expressed before.<sup>2</sup> For example, it is known that Sigismund was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1433,<sup>3</sup> yet Urban freely titles him "emperor" even before his journey to Rome (pp. 144, 147, 154, 157, 180), although in later chapters the author is more careful about this. In many parts, the complexity of information, unfortunately, overwhelms the reader who is left to believe the author since there are no footnotes or endnotes. Even though Urban lists new studies at the end of the book (*Recommended Reading*), one is not convinced that new research concerning the history of the region was used at all.

Regrettably, many avoidable mistakes put the book's credibility into question. For example, Urban states that Jagiełło was as an Orthodox Christian before becoming a Roman Catholic (p. 21), although there are no sources to back up such a statement. The author mistakenly specifies that the grand master of the Teutonic Order, Ulrich von Jungingen, received a letter from a mercenary about the Lithuanian feigned attack just before the battle of Tannenberg (p. 120). The aforementioned letter (although without a date) was in fact written after the battle.<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, this error did not occur in *Tannenberg and After*. Urban also suggests that Jagiełło was excommunicated by the pope (p. 194), even though this never happened. On pages 224–225, the date of the conference of Luck is given as 1427, but it should be 1429. In addition, the whole subchapter about the plans to crown Vytautas is misleading. For example, Urban incorrectly states that the regalia sent by Sigismund to Vytautas were seized by the Poles (p. 228). Indeed, the first delegation was stopped and the documents were taken from them, but only the second delegation that followed the first one had the crowns. They turned around after they had heard about the fate of the first delegation. Unfortunately, there are also minor typos (pp. 142, 282) and a sentence without spaces (p. 164). The map in the first chapter inaccurately shows the city of Constantinople as part of the Ottoman

<sup>2</sup> Paul W. Knoll, Review of *Tannenberg and After: Lithuania, Poland, and the Teutonic Order in Search of Immortality* by William Urban, *The Catholic Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (2004): 537.

<sup>3</sup> See Veronika Proske, *Der Romzug Kaiser Sigismund (1431–1433): Politische Kommunikation, Herrschaftsrepräsentation und -rezeption* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Sven Ekdahl, "Die Flucht der Litauer in der Schlacht bei Tannenberg," *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung* 12, H. 1 (1963): 11–19.

Empire in the late 14th century. The factual inaccuracies and typos listed here are only a few among many more that are scattered throughout the book. Given that this is the adapted version of an older book with the same basic material, it seems that the author did not proofread the text and left many mistakes from a previous version.<sup>5</sup>

The book covers a wide variety of topics, such as commerce, *realpolitik*, personalities, sex, alcoholism, travels, disputes, etc. It is written in non-formal style, so the general reader should find it easy to read and learn much about East-Central Europe. However, fellow colleagues in the field of history may be disappointed. It is clear that the strongest parts of this book are the history of the Teutonic Knights at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, and the battle of Tannenberg. Here the author is at his best. Other topics, such as Thirteen-Years War or the Reformation, are unfortunately oversimplified with many factual mistakes. Sadly, this book is not worthy of too much attention, since Urban's previous book *Tannenberg and After* is far better.

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<sup>5</sup> Gregory Guzman, Review of *Tannenberg and After: Lithuania, Poland, and the Teutonic Order in Search of Immortality* by William Urban, *Journal of Baltic Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 318.

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