

The Crusades

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS A CRUSADE?

Over the years, the term “crusade” and the idea of crusade has been explained and critiqued from vastly polarized points of view.

Throughout history, crusaders and crusades have been romanticized by tales of valorous knights, noble kings, pious soldiers. Chivalry and nobility reigned. They have also been maligned and despised. Enlightenment philosophers and 18th century atheists took a decidedly negative view of the crusades.

The 19th century saw a resurgence of positive feelings toward the crusades. It was during this time that the word crusade even came to refer to any noble cause or an effort of good versus evil. The Red Cross might have a crusade to promote health. Billy Graham had evangelistic crusades. A school might even take the crusader as a mascot. This positive view lasted until the 1960s. At that point, liberal, left leaning and Marxist politicians connected the idea of crusading with imperialism. Today, many view the crusades as a so that today it is largely seen as a movement of White Christian Supremacy.ⁱ

Since it has become so politically charged, people take extreme positions on both sides of the debate. One side speaks of how evil Christians attacked peaceful Muslims.

Cenk Uygurⁱⁱ

The Muslims didn't come up from Jerusalem into Europe and attack Christendom. No, Christians went down to Jerusalem.

The other side sees it as a holy and just mission of the Roman Church.

What seems to be true if nothing else is, is that people are prone to project modern political and religious opinions onto the crusades. This tells us that they were one of the most significant events in history. It also tells us that we need to be very careful to let the facts speak for themselves.

? What is a crusade?

Crusade

The state of being marked with a cross

There were other military actions led by Christian leaders against Muslims. What made a crusade was that it was sanctioned by the Pope who promised indulgences for those who fought. Crusades were not merely fought against Muslims, but also against other heretics. However, the term *crusade* wasn't coined until almost a century after the first crusade.

So, a crusade was a military action, called by a pope, fought by soldiers marked with the cross, extending “Christianity” into territory once owned by Christians, now overrun by Muslims. Much of the criticism of the crusades centers around the horrors of it, women and children killed, beheadings and torture. While we can't condone these actions, we should also understand that that was medieval warfare. It wasn't that the Christians or the Muslims were particularly evil, but that Medieval warfare was particularly brutal. We can count anywhere from eight to eleven crusades depending on how strict you make the criteria.

I. THE FIRST CRUSADE

Of the eight or eleven crusades, the first one is the most significant. The others have interesting points that add to the story, but none of the other crusades accomplished as much as the first

A. BACKGROUND

1. A Sort of Peace

The Arabs and the Byzantines had been constantly feuding since the rise of Islam in the 7th century. Things had settled down to some degree by 995AD and Emperor Basil II was able to extend the Byzantine territory even as far as Persia by 1025 AD. Jerusalem had been lost to the Muslims, but that had been 300 years earlier.

2. A New Player

However, even though circumstances had settled down between the Byzantines and the Muslims, other people were moving throughout the world. A nomadic tribe known as the Seljuk Turks came west from central Asia and, within two decades, conquered Persia. Along the way, they adopted Islam as their religion. The Turks conquered Jerusalem from the Fatimids. The Fatimids were Muslims, but they were Muslims who had allowed Jews and Christians a certain amount of freedom to worship. They had also allowed Christians to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem from other parts of the world.

The new Muslim overlords were not so generous. They molested caravans of pilgrims. In 1065 a caravan of 12,000 unarmed pilgrims were attacked, 9,000 being killed. The Turks also attacked Antioch and conquered much of Anatolia. This prompted the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I Comnenus to appeal to the West for aid in 1095.

3. An Appeal For Help

Alexius I letter to Robert of Flanders 1087?ⁱⁱⁱ

The blood of Christians flows in unheard-of scenes of carnage...Therefore in the name of God...we implore you to bring to this city [Constantinople] all the faithful soldiers of Christ."

Even before this, people had been considering a campaign to free the Holy Land from the Turks, but it was at the Council of Clermont in November 1095 that the official proclamation came. Alexius had sent envoys to attend the council and to appeal yet again for help. Pope Urban II officially called on those present to free the Holy Lands.

He gave three points of justification.

- a. Aid Byzantium
- b. Liberate Jerusalem
- c. Secure safe passage for pilgrims

By all accounts it can be argued that this was a just war politically. Whether it was the right thing to do as a church is yet another debate.

4. A New Kind Of War

This was a different kind of war, sanctioned by the church, fought by a united Europe, by an army consisting of people from all walks of life, men, women and children, clergy, and laymen. It was also the first Christian war that resembled Jihad.

Canon 2, Council of Clermont^{iv}

Whoever for devotion alone, and not for the purpose of gaining honor or money, heads for Jerusalem to liberate the Church of God, that expedition is to be imputed to him [as satisfaction] for all penance

While there were other motivations for the war such as renown, heroism, boredom, and wages, the fact is that rather than promise riches, it cost much. The one unifying motivation that made the first crusade possible was the promise of

forgiveness of sins. The battle cry of the crusades was "God wills it!"

B. THE MARCH

Immediately, a priest named Peter the Hermit gathered men, women and children from England and France and began to march east. While marching through the Rhineland, Peter and his "people's crusade" in religious fervor, massacred colonies of Jews because they were responsible for killing the Lord Jesus Christ. They continued to march east to Constantinople where they met another group of crusaders, led by the aristocracy. This army was led by Raymond IV of Toulouse, Godfrey of Bouillon and his brother Baldwin of Boulogne, and Stephen of Blois, to name a few. Between the two groups numbers are estimated at between 60,000 and 100,000 people.

This army arrived in Constantinople in 1096 where they were welcomed by Alexius I. The Latin leaders promised that any land conquered would return to Byzantium. From Constantinople, fortified with Byzantine troops under the command of Alexius, the army divided into two and marched for Nicaea.

C. THE SIEGE OF NICAEA

The armies met in Nicaea where they made first contact with Turkish Cavalry. They had never seen this kind of warfare and were quickly routed. Even so, the Western Army held their ground and eventually defeated the Turks. The siege lasted only 1 month in the Spring of 1097. From Nicaea, the Crusaders overwhelmed the Muslim defenders in Anatolia because the Muslims at this point were plagued by division and jealousy. However, they were hindered by hunger and heat. It is estimated that about one half of the Crusader army was lost in the march east.

C. THE SIEGE OF ANTIOCH

The first major battle of the crusade was at Antioch, formerly one of the Patriarchates of the early church, now one of the most strongly fortified cities of the Medieval world.

It was October of 1097, two years after the initial call to arms. By this time, the Muslims had made a shaky alliance to ward off the crusaders and they outnumbered the Christians 2/1. The result was an 8-month siege.

There was fighting and reinforcements, pillaging for food and supplies, and in April 1098, a negotiation. The Fatimids were willing to give up Syria if the crusaders would leave Palestine alone, but the crusaders would accept nothing that did not include Jerusalem.

The siege finally ended when Bohemond of Taranto revealed that he knew a way into the city. Being fluent in Greek, He had made contact with an Armenian Christian convert to Islam named Firouz, who was in command of one of the towers. Firouz was willing to give up the tower in exchange for a title and money. Bohemond was willing to share his secret in exchange for the right to rule the city. Raymond was enraged, arguing that the city should be returned to Byzantium, but he and the other crusaders were desperate (news had reached them of a large Muslim army coming to the aid of Antioch). The leaders finally agreed to Bohemond's terms. Stephen Blois and other crusaders deserted and went to Tarsus, but the crusaders gained the city and reinstated John the Oxite as Patriarch.

The large Muslim army led by Kerbogaha finally arrived at Antioch. The crusaders had the city, but after eight months, the supplies were short.

Morale was low. There were more desertions. Alexius heard that yet another Seljuk army was advancing and decided to return to Constantinople.

It was at this low point that a lowly priest named Peter Bartholomew had a vision about finding the spear that had pierced the side of Christ. Inspired by his dream people began digging in the Cathedral of St. Peter. Finally, when everyone was about to give up, lo and behold, Peter himself joined found the tip of the spear. Peter said that if they fasted for five days, they would be victorious. Raymond believed Peter.

The crusaders were able to route the Muslims who surrendered to Bohemond, who then claimed the city. From this point, Raymond took the army and made other excursions around Lebanon. Peter Bartholomew became more erratic until he voluntarily went through a trial by ordeal. He walked through flames. He died one month later. This led to division among the leaders who still sought Jerusalem as their primary objective. Godfrey was given command and he led a force to Jerusalem. They reached it by June of 1099, although with only 10 percent of their original numbers.

D. THE SEIGE OF JERUSALEM, 1099

The governor of Jerusalem, fearing the crusaders made preparation for a siege, expelling all Christians for fear that they would betray him. The

crusaders launched their first attack on June 13. The problem for the crusaders in addition to low numbers, heat, little water and food, was a lack of wood and no siege equipment. To make matters worse an army was coming from Egypt to help the Muslims in Palestine.

The tide of the battle turned when Robert of Normandy and Robert of Flanders found wood to make siege engines. This along with supplies from English and Genoese ships gave the crusaders the edge they needed. On July 14, Godfrey attacked from the north and Raymond from the south.

The city was taken, and a massacre ensued the following day. Both Muslims and Jews were killed. Various estimates puts the number somewhere in the 10s of thousands. Their objectives complete, the crusaders established four new territories: County of Edessa (1098–1150), the Principality of Antioch (1098–1287), the County of Tripoli (1102–1289), and the Kingdom of Jerusalem (1099–1291).

? How should we think of the crusades?

? How did the crusades affect the Church and Theology? How did the crusades affect history?

II. OTHER CRUSADES

ⁱ Weber, Benjamin, "The Journey of the Word Crusade -From Holy to Oppressive...and Back Again," <https://theconversation.com/the-journey-of-the-word-crusade-from-holy-to-oppressive-and-back-again-132124>, May 2022

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8prwEJk3Ds&t=51s>, May 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/alexius-i-comnenus>, May 2022.

^{iv} https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304783755_Canon_2_of_the_Council_of_Clermont_1095_and_the_Goal_of_the_Eastern_Crusade_To_liberate_Jerusalem_or_To_liberate_the_Church_of_God, May 2022.

v. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crusades>, May 2022.

