



## Crusade Myths | Thomas F. Madden

The Crusades are much in the news of late. President Bush made the mistake of referring to the war against terrorism as a "crusade" and was roundly criticized for uttering a word both offensive and hurtful to the world's Muslims. If it is painful, then it is remarkable indeed how often the Arabs themselves make use of the word. Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar have repeatedly referred to Americans as "crusaders" and the present war as a "crusade against Islam." For decades now Americans have been routinely referred to as "crusaders" or "cowboys" among Arabs in the Middle East. Clearly the crusades are very much alive in the Muslim world.

They are not forgotten in the West either. Actually, despite the many differences between the East and West, most people in both cultures are in agreement about the Crusades. It is commonly accepted that the Crusades are a black mark on the history of Western civilization generally and the Catholic Church in particular. Anyone eager to bash Catholics will not long tarry before brandishing the Crusades and the Inquisition. The Crusades are often used as a classic example of the evil that organized religion can do. Your average man on the street in both New York and Cairo would agree that the Crusades were an insidious, cynical, and unprovoked attack by religious zealots against a peaceful, prosperous, and sophisticated Muslim world.

It was not always so. During the Middle Ages you could not find a Christian in Europe who did not believe that the Crusades were an act of highest good. Even the Muslims respected the ideals of the Crusades and the piety of the men who fought them. But that all changed with the Protestant Reformation. For Martin Luther, who had already jettisoned the Christian doctrines of papal authority and indulgences, the Crusades were nothing more than a ploy by a power-hungry papacy. Indeed, he argued that to fight the Muslims was to fight Christ himself, for it was he who had sent the Turks to punish Christendom for its faithlessness. When Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent and his armies began to invade Austria, Luther changed his mind about the need to fight, but he stuck to his condemnation of the Crusades. During the next two centuries people tended to view the Crusades through a confessional lens: Protestants demonized them, Catholics extolled them. As for Suleiman and his successors, they were just glad to be rid of them.

It was in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century that the current view of the Crusades was born. Most of the *philosophes*, like Voltaire, believed that medieval Christianity was a vile superstition. For them the Crusades were a migration of barbarians led by fanaticism, greed, and lust. Since then, the Enlightenment take on the Crusades has gone in and out of fashion. The Crusades received good press as wars of nobility (although not religion) during the Romantic period and the early twentieth century. After the Second World War, however, opinion again turned decisively against the Crusades. In the wake of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, historians found war of ideology—any ideology—distasteful. This sentiment was summed up by Sir Steven Runciman in his three-volume work, *A History of the Crusades* (1951-54). For Runciman, the Crusades were morally repugnant acts of intolerance in the name of God. The medieval men who took the cross and marched to the Middle East were either cynically evil, rapaciously greedy, or naively gullible. This beautifully written history soon became the standard. Almost single-handedly Runciman managed to define

the modern popular view of the Crusades.

Since the 1970s the Crusades have attracted many hundreds of scholars who have meticulously poked, prodded, and examined them. As a result, much more is known about Christianity's holy wars than ever before. Yet the fruits of decades of scholarship have been slow to enter the popular mind. In part this is the fault of professional historians, who tend to publish studies that, by necessity, are technical and therefore not easily accessible outside of the academy. But it is also due to a clear reluctance among modern elites to let go of Runciman's vision of the Crusades. And so modern popular books on the Crusades—desiring, after all, to be popular—tend to parrot Runciman. The same is true for other media, like the multi-part television documentary, *The Crusades* (1995), produced by BBC/A&E and starring Terry Jones of *Monty Python* fame. To give the latter an air of authority the producers spliced in a number of distinguished Crusade historians who gave their views on events. The problem was that the historians would not go along with Runciman's ideas. No matter. The producers simply edited the taped interviews cleverly enough that the historians seemed to be agreeing with Runciman. As Professor Jonathan Riley-Smith quite vehemently told me, "They made me appear to say things that I do not believe!"

So, what is the real story of the Crusades? As you might imagine, it is a long story. But there are good histories, written in the last twenty years, that lay much of it out. For the moment, given the barrage of coverage that the Crusades are getting nowadays, it might be best to consider just what the Crusades were not. Here, then, are some of the most common myths and why they are wrong.

***Myth 1: The Crusades were wars of unprovoked aggression against a peaceful Muslim world.***

This is as wrong as wrong can be. From the time of Mohammed, Muslims had sought to conquer the Christian world. They did a pretty good job of it, too. After a few centuries of steady conquests, Muslim armies had taken all of North Africa, the Middle East, Asia Minor, and most of Spain. In other words, by the end of the eleventh century the forces of Islam had captured two-thirds of the Christian world. Palestine, the home of Jesus Christ; Egypt, the birthplace of Christian monasticism; Asia Minor, where St. Paul planted the seeds of the first Christian communities: These were not the periphery of Christianity but its very core. And the Muslim empires were not finished yet. They continued to press westward toward Constantinople, ultimately passing it and entering Europe itself. As far as unprovoked aggression goes, it was all on the Muslim side. At some point what was left of the Christian world would have to defend itself or simply succumb to Islamic conquest. The First Crusade was called by Pope Urban II in 1095 in response to an urgent plea for help from the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople. Urban called the knights of Christendom to come to the aid of their eastern brethren. It was to be an errand of mercy, liberating the Christians of the East from their Muslim conquerors. In other words, the Crusades were from the beginning a *defensive* war. The entire history of the eastern Crusades is one of response to Muslim aggression.

***Myth 2: The Crusaders wore crosses, but they were really only interested in capturing booty and land. Their pious platitudes were just a cover for rapacious greed.***

Historians used to believe that a rise in Europe's population led to a crisis of too many noble "second sons," those who were trained in chivalric warfare but who had no feudal lands to inherit. The Crusades, therefore, were seen as a safety valve, sending these belligerent men far from Europe where they could carve out lands for themselves at someone else's expense. Modern scholarship, assisted by the advent of computer databases, has exploded this myth. We now know that it was the "first sons" of Europe that answered the pope's call in 1095, as well as in subsequent Crusades. Crusading was an enormously expensive operation. Lords were

forced to sell off or mortgage their lands to gather the necessary funds. They were also not interested in an overseas kingdom. Much like a soldier today, the medieval Crusader was proud to do his duty but longed to return home. After the spectacular successes of the First Crusade, with Jerusalem and much of Palestine in Crusader hands, virtually all of the Crusaders went home. Only a tiny handful remained behind to consolidate and govern the newly won territories. Booty was also scarce. In fact, although Crusaders no doubt dreamed of vast wealth in opulent Eastern cities, virtually none of them ever even recouped their expenses. But money and land were not the reasons that they went on Crusade in the first place. They went to atone for their sins and to win salvation by doing good works in a faraway land.

***Myth 3: When the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099 they massacred every man, woman, and child in the city until the streets ran ankle deep with the blood.***

This is a favorite used to demonstrate the evil nature of the Crusades. Most recently, Bill Clinton in a speech at Georgetown cited this as one reason the United States is a victim of Muslim terrorism. (Although Mr. Clinton brought the blood up to knee level for effect.) It is certainly true that many people in Jerusalem were killed after the Crusaders captured the city. But this must be understood in historical context. The accepted moral standard in all pre-modern European and Asian civilizations was that a city that resisted capture and was taken by force belonged to the victorious forces. That included not just the buildings and goods, but the people as well. That is why every city or fortress had to weigh carefully whether it could hold out against besiegers. If not, it was wise to negotiate terms of surrender. In the case of Jerusalem, the defenders had resisted right up to the end. They calculated that the formidable walls of the city would keep the Crusaders at bay until a relief force in Egypt could arrive. They were wrong. When the city fell, therefore, it was put to the sack. Many were killed, yet many others were ransomed or allowed to go free. By modern standards this may seem brutal. Yet a medieval knight would point out that many more innocent men, women, and children are killed in modern bombing warfare than could possibly be put to the sword in one or two days. It is worth noting that in those Muslim cities that surrendered to the Crusaders the people were left unmolested, retained their property, and allowed to worship freely. As for those streets of blood, no historian accepts them as anything other than a literary convention. Jerusalem is a big town. The amount of blood necessary to fill the streets to a continuous and running three-inch depth would require many more people than lived in the region, let alone the city.

***Myth 4: The Crusades were just medieval colonialism dressed up in religious finery.***

It is important to remember that in the Middle Ages the West was not a powerful, dominant culture venturing into a primitive or backward region. It was the Muslim East that was powerful, wealthy, and opulent. Europe was the third world. The Crusader States, founded in the wake of the First Crusade, were not new plantations of Catholics in a Muslim world akin to the British colonization of America. Catholic presence in the Crusader States was always tiny, easily less than ten percent of the population. These were the rulers and magistrates, as well as Italian merchants and members of the military orders. The overwhelming majority of the population in the Crusader States was Muslim. They were not colonies, therefore, in the sense of plantations or even factories, as in the case of India. They were outposts. The ultimate purpose of the Crusader States was to defend the Holy Places in Palestine, especially Jerusalem, and to provide a safe environment for Christian pilgrims to visit those places. There was no mother country with which the Crusader States had an economic relationship, nor did Europeans economically benefit from them. Quite the contrary, the expense of Crusades to maintain the Latin East was a serious drain on European resources. As an outpost, the Crusader States kept a military focus. While the Muslims warred against each other the Crusader States were safe, but

once united the Muslims were able to dismantle the strongholds, capture the cities, and in 1291 expel the Christians completely.

**Myth 5: *The Crusades were also waged against the Jews.***

No pope ever called a Crusade against Jews. During the First Crusade a large band of riffraff, not associated with the main army, descended on the towns of the Rhineland and decided to rob and kill the Jews they found there. In part this was pure greed. In part it also stemmed from the incorrect belief that the Jews, as the crucifiers of Christ, were legitimate targets of the war. Pope Urban II and subsequent popes strongly condemned these attacks on Jews. Local bishops and other clergy and laity attempted to defend the Jews, although with limited success. Similarly, during the opening phase of the Second Crusade a group of renegades killed many Jews in Germany before St. Bernard was able to catch up to them and put a stop to it. These misfires of the movement were an unfortunate byproduct of Crusade enthusiasm. But they were not the purpose of the Crusades. To use a modern analogy, during the Second World War some American soldiers committed crimes while overseas. They were arrested and punished for those crimes. But the purpose of the Second World War was not to commit crimes.

**Myth 6: *The Crusades were so corrupt and vile that they even had a Children's Crusade.***

The so-called "Children's Crusade" of 1212 was neither a Crusade nor an army of children. It was a particularly large eruption of popular religious enthusiasm in Germany that led some young people, mostly adolescents, to proclaim themselves Crusaders and begin marching to the sea. Along the way they gathered plenty of popular support and not a few brigands, robbers, and beggars as well. The movement splintered in Italy and finally ended when the Mediterranean failed to dry up for them to cross. Pope Innocent III did not call this "Crusade." Indeed, he repeatedly urged non-combatants to stay at home, helping the war effort through fasting, prayer, and alms. In this case, he praised the zeal of the young who had marched so far, and then told them to go home.

**Myth 7: *Pope John Paul II apologized for the Crusades.***

This is an odd myth, given that the pope was so roundly criticized for failing to apologize directly for the Crusades when he asked forgiveness from all those that Christians had unjustly harmed. It is true that John Paul recently apologized to the Greeks for the Fourth Crusade's sack of Constantinople in 1204. But the pope at the time, Innocent III, expressed similar regret. That, too, was a tragic misfire that Innocent had done everything he could to avoid.

**Myth 8: *Muslims, who remember the Crusades vividly, have good reason to hate the West.***

Actually, the Muslim world remembers the Crusades about as well as the West—in other words, incorrectly. That should not be surprising. Muslims get their information about the Crusades from the same rotten histories that the West relies on. The Muslim world used to celebrate the Crusades as a great victory for them. They did, after all, win. But western authors, fretting about the legacy of modern imperialism, have recast the Crusades as wars of aggression and the Muslims as placid sufferers. In so doing they have rescinded centuries of Muslim triumphs, offering in their stead only the consolation of victimhood.

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