

Belief and Violence: The Crusades

Church leaders, secular rulers, and common folk alike came together in an attempt to change things in a far-off land they believed should rightfully be ruled by Christians—specifically, European Christians. The impetus behind the Crusades was the desire to free the land in which Jesus had lived and carried out his ministry from the hands of “infidels.” The Crusaders could not know that the tensions and hatreds sparked by the conflict they were starting would erupt into tragedy so many times over the centuries to follow.

In the second half of the eleventh century, many Westerners headed out on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The area was controlled by a Saracen group known as the Seljuks, and they were unhappy at this influx of European Christians. They began to make life difficult for the pilgrims.

In 1095, Pope Urban II called on the French to “liberate” the land from Seljuk control. In doing so, he was also asserting his power over the French ruler, declaring the authority of a pope to get kings and princes to put their resources at the service of the Church. In fact, political power played a large role in all of the Crusades, but the slogan adopted for the First Crusade—“*Deus volt!*” or “God wills it!”—gives us insight into what was in the hearts of the Pope, the French king, and all the Crusaders.

The First Crusade was a military success; the Crusaders captured Jerusalem and other lands. They set up four kingdoms ruled by Western knights, congratulated themselves on a job well done, and then most of them returned home. However, the lands under Western rule were mainly along the coastline, and the Seljuks still controlled the inland, which inevitably meant more fighting. Six more Crusades aimed at taking control of the Holy Land were preached and fought over the next two centuries. Some had a little success and some were terrible failures, but in the end, the Westerners had to give up and the Saracens remained in charge.

In this history of tragedies, one of the greatest belongs to the Fourth Crusade, when the Crusaders got diverted from their intended mission and turned their destructive attention to the great city of Constantinople, where they had been asked to help a deposed emperor regain his throne.

The Crusaders left much of the city in ruins. Entire libraries and priceless works of art were destroyed, churches were plundered, and the beautiful Hagia Sophia suffered more damage from these Christian invaders than it would experience when the city was taken by the Turks in 1453. Even the great altar was torn apart so that the Crusaders could get to the gold and silver within it. Finally, one of the crusading nobles was appointed the new emperor, a situation that lasted until 1261.

History sees the Fourth Crusade as the final break, the moment when the divide between the two branches of Christianity became insurmountable. What trust could there be after this? What ties of Christian love could overcome this act of Christian violence?

The following table provides a snapshot of the Crusades: when, why, and how each went.

	When	Why Called	How It Went
First	1096–1099	Pilgrims’ problems	French knights set up kingdom in Jerusalem and three other areas.
Second	1146–1149	Loss of one of the Crusader kingdoms to Saracens	Called by Pope Eugenius II and preached by Bernard of Clairvaux. Fought by French and Germans. Ended in total defeat.



	When	Why Called	How It Went
Third	1187–1190	Saracen leader Saladin's conquest of Jerusalem	Fell apart when the French king took his knights and went home. English king Richard the Lionhearted negotiated a treaty that permitted Christian pilgrims to visit the holy places.
Fourth	1201–1204	Failure to recapture Jerusalem during Third Crusade	Crusaders turned aside to Constantinople and ended up conquering a Christian city. Complete break of communion between East and West.
Fifth & Sixth	1228–1229	Wanted to capture Egypt, which would pave the way to recapture Jerusalem	After some initial success, ended in defeat, although an unstable kingdom was established in Jerusalem.
Seventh	1248–1254	Loss of Jerusalem in 1244 and vow of Louis IX of France to go on Crusade if he recovered from an illness	Terrible loss of life and money, with little to show for it. In 1270, Louis returned, wanting to finish what he had started, but both he and a son died on this Crusade.

And All This Leads To . . .

The impact of the Crusades goes well beyond their military failure. Contact with Arab civilizations profoundly affected the West's access to philosophical and scientific knowledge. In spite of the disaster of the Fourth Crusade and the final break between the Eastern and Western Churches, the East and West actually got to know each other again. This helped prompt trade between the two former parts of the Empire, which was a big help to Italian port cities. Since all those people traveling far from home needed a way to be able to pay for things, the Crusades also were key in getting a money economy going in Europe. With so much aggression being turned toward the Saracens, the West experienced a significant drop in social tension. A European peasant now had to worry less about his lands being destroyed in a fight between warring lords.

The Crusades also got people thinking about what it means to fight a holy war and when violence may be used in the service of religious goals. Sadly, most decided in favor of force. This led to Christians feeling justified in using brutality to evangelize areas that were not traditionally Christian. Hatred of the Jews also became more prominent, leading to the expulsion of all Jews from England in 1290, from France in 1306, from Spain in 1492, and from Portugal in 1497.

Finally, the idea of the religious crusade became important in Western thought. Spanish Christians fighting the Saracens in Spain from the eleventh through the fifteenth centuries talked about it as a crusade; so did German Christians fighting the pagan Wends in the twelfth century and northern French nobles fighting the Cathars in the early part of the thirteenth century. It did not take long for popes to begin declaring crusades against any European leaders who challenged them. In the modern world, the word *crusade* remains a flashpoint between Christians and their Muslim and Jewish neighbors. When Christians hear *crusade*, they usually think of fighting for a noble cause, but when Jews and Muslims hear it, they often think of outsiders' trampling on their religious beliefs.

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