

THE BATTLE OVER THE CRUSADES

By Robert P. Lockwood

Mention the Crusades and the assumption is of a ruthless Church driving Europe into a barbaric war of aggression and plunder against a peaceful Islamic population in the Holy Land. As the common portrait paints it, led by mad preachers and manipulating power-hungry popes, the Crusades were a Church-sponsored invasion and slaughter that descended into a massacre at Jerusalem, the sack of Constantinople and the persecution of European Jews.

The Crusades, of course, are a far more complicated series of events in history than these anti-Catholic assumptions. Narrowly and traditionally defined, the Crusades involved a military attempt under a vow of faith to regain the Holy Land – containing the sites of the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus – from its Islamic conquerors.

This papal purpose, however, would become caught up in dynastic feuds, schism and heresies, economic warfare over Mediterranean trade, the reunification and rise of an aggressive Islamic military movement, and the final destruction of the Eastern Roman Empire.

Jerusalem had been captured from the Byzantine Empire in 638 by Islamic forces just six years after the death of the prophet Mohammed. It was part of an aggressive military campaign that would seize Syria, North Africa and Spain from the old Roman Empire now based in Constantinople.

At the same time, differences within the Church as it developed in the East and West became more pronounced over the centuries. The Eastern Church resented the juridical authority of Rome. Thorny theological issues would divide the Church in the East far more than the West. Schisms and heresies would breakdown the unity of the Church in the East even before the

major break between East and West in the schism of 1054.

The invasion of the Byzantine Empire by the Islamic Seljuk Turks in the 11th Century was the direct cause of the First Crusade. Imperial forces were destroyed at the battle of Manzikert in 1071. Ten years later, Alexius Comnenus would assume the imperial throne when it appeared that the entire Empire was on the verge of collapse. He quickly developed a cordial relationship with Pope Urban II who held a council of the Church in 1095 in which representatives of the Empire were in attendance. In desperate need of soldiers, they begged for assistance from the West to hold off the Seljuk advance. In November 1095 at a Church council in Clermont, France, Pope Urban II issued the formal call for a Crusade to rescue eastern Christendom and recover the Holy Land to make it safe for pilgrimage.

Why did Urban support the idea of a Crusade to the Holy Land and put the weight of the Church behind it? Clearly, the return of the Holy Land and the defense of the Christian communities in the Near East were the first objectives. But there were additional concerns. There was the clear threat of the Seljuks. If Constantinople fell, all Eastern Europe would be wide open to Islamic advance. Additionally, the pope certainly believed that allying with Constantinople could heal the disunity of Christianity caused by the schism of 1054.

But even more was involved. Urban was of the line of the great reforming popes that had greeted the new millennium and would continue through the 13th Century. Led by a strong papacy, the goal was to sanctify the world through a combination of the Church's need to reform its institutional life free from control by secular lords, and to build a Christian society. The defense and unity of this goal of a new Christendom was at stake.

An additional part of this reformation of Christian life was to somehow end, or deter, the incessant warfare that plagued

the European community. The incessant Christian slaughter of Christians had led to the "truce of God" movement in the 11th Century as part of the general attempt at creating this new Christendom. While it seems contradictory to encourage a Crusade in the interest of peace, there was certainly the papal hope that turning the incessant warring fervor outward to defend Christendom was greater than the continuing scandal of Christians slaughtering Christians.

There were other forces at work in the Crusades, however, that would negatively impact both the image and the results of the Crusades. The Frankish lords taking part in the First Crusade viewed it as an opportunity for conquest and new lands to rule. At the same time, the Emperor Alexius in Constantinople viewed the Crusaders as recapturing land for the Empire. These contrary expectations would increase the bad blood between East and West. In the Holy Land itself, various Islamic dynasties would see the crusaders as much as potential allies than enemies. The "kingdoms" established after the First Crusade would be caught up in the regional power disputes of the Islamic leaders, as well as their own dynastic ambitions. And finally, there was the ambition of the Italian cities to extend their rising commercial power. They saw the Crusades as an opportunity to dominate trade in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Three events of the Crusades are most commonly used as a club against the Church: the anti-Jewish riots in the Rhineland of Germany and the massacre at Jerusalem in the First Crusade; and the sack of Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade.

Shortly after the call for a Crusade, mobs of the poor began to assemble and "march" toward Constantinople. In the Rhineland these disparate mobs of peasants and townsfolk began to launch attacks on the Jews. Throughout the Rhineland, however, the Church became the sole protector of the Jews in the face of these mobs. At Worms, the bishop opened up his home to protect the Jewish community, but the mobs broke in and slaughtered them. As the rag-tag army approached Cologne,

Jews were hidden in Christian homes and the archbishop was able to protect most of them. At Trier, most of the Jewish community was protected in the archbishop's palace. Eventually, these peasant armies were destroyed – by Christians and Turks – and most of western Christendom viewed it as just penalty for their anti-Jewish atrocities. When the Second Crusade was preached, St. Bernard of Clairvaux went to the Rhineland to stamp out anti-Jewish riots, and they effectively ceased as part of the crusading movement.

The First Crusade with papal blessing was made up of four Frankish armies that assembled at Constantinople. It successfully took advantage of Islamic Arab disunity and, on July 15, 1099, the Crusaders took Jerusalem. The papal legate, however, had died. Without his restraint, the crusading army – reduced to about 12,000 – stormed the walls and engaged in a horrific slaughter of the Islamic and Jewish population. .

The Crusaders essentially held four areas in the Holy Land – Jerusalem, Antioch, Edessa and Tripoli. They had only small numbers to defend themselves and would need to rely on western military aid to survive. After first seeing the Crusaders as possibly useful allies in their internecine conflicts, the Islamic world in the Near East became more unified in its resistance. In 1144, Edessa was retaken. A Second Crusade failed and in 1169, Saladin came to power in Egypt and in 1187 Jerusalem was retaken. Tyre, Antioch and Tripoli remained as the only Christian-held outposts.

The Third Crusade in response to Saladin's successes was launched and would create much of the romantic legends and myths that surround the Crusades. Richard the Lion Heart of England would engage Saladin in a ritual of attacks and counterattacks, as well as chivalrous courtesies. While he succeeded in the siege of Acre and securing the port of Jaffa, Richard was unable to retake Jerusalem and left the Holy Land in 1192, ending the Third Crusade.

The Fourth Crusade began as a fundamental part of the reforming zeal of Pope Innocent III. He negotiated with the Emperor Alexius III, who had ascended the imperial throne in 1195 after overthrowing his brother, for a healing of the schism and a joint effort to retake the Holy Land. But under the machinations of the Doge of Venice, Enrico Dandolo, the Crusade was taken from papal hands and turned toward Venetian goals. An attack was launched for control of Dalmatia and a horrified pope condemned this betrayal of crusading goals. The armies then turned toward Constantinople where, in league with the son of the deposed Byzantine emperor, a revolution was hatched to secure Constantinople as a Venetian puppet. When the citizens of Constantinople rejected the young pretender and refused to pay-off the Crusaders, the city was attacked. It was virtually destroyed, its art works stolen or destroyed, its citizenry ruthlessly murdered. A Western Empire was set up that would last just a short time and Innocent, seeing in it the hope of reunification of Christendom, finally accepted it. But the attack on Constantinople was never planned or ordered by the Church.

The sack of Constantinople ended the Fourth Crusade and effectively determined that the Crusades would not succeed in its original purpose. The empire would not recover and in 1453 the Turks would capture Constantinople, kill the emperor, and end the Byzantine Empire. The Church was not reunified, as the Greeks would never forgive the West for the atrocities at Constantinople. The schism of 1054 would become permanent. Other crusades followed, but by 1291 the Latin kingdom in the Holy Land came to an end.

Though initiated at the request of the Byzantine emperors and by the dream of successive popes for a safe Holy Land and a united Christendom, the Crusades and the crusaders were never controlled by the Church. Even the First Crusade, though inspired by lofty ideals, essentially became a means for Frankish knights to recreate small feudal kingdoms in a

backwater of the Islamic empire. The negative results of the Crusades are clear in the sack of Constantinople and the hardening of the divisions in Christendom between East and West. But to point to the Crusades as a symbol of a power-crazed Church engaging in slaughter to pursue its own nefarious ends is to misunderstand history and simply to look for an excuse for contemporary bigotry.