The Crusades - Pilgrimage or Holy War?: Crash Course World History #15

Crash Course: World History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=X0zudTQelzI
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/X0zudTQelzI

Hi there! My name is John Green; this is Crash Course World History, and today we're going to talk about the Crusades. Ohhh, Stan, do we have to talk about the Crusades? I hate them...

Here's the thing about the Crusades, which were a series of military expeditions from parts of Europe to the Eastern coast of the Mediterranean. The real reason they feature so prominently in history is because we've endlessly romanticized the story of the Crusades. We've created this simple narrative with characters to root for and root against, and it's all been endlessly idealized by the likes of Sir Walter Scott. And there are knights with swords and lion hearts... NO, STAN. LIONHEARTS. Thank you.

(Intro)

Let's start by saying that initially the Crusades were not a "holy war" on the part of Europeans against Islam, but in important ways the Crusades were driven by religious faith.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Religion causes all wars. Imagine no war —

I'm gonna cut you off right there before you violate copyright, me-from-the-past. But as usual, you're wrong. Simple readings of history are rarely sufficient. By the way, when did my handwriting get so much better?

I mean, if the Crusades had been brought on by the lightning-fast rise of the Islamic empire and a desire to keep in Christian hands the land of Jesus, then the Crusades would've started in the 8th century. But early Islamic dynasties, like the Umayyads and the Abbasids, were perfectly happy with Christians and Jews living among them, as long as they paid a tax. And plus the Christian pilgrimage business was awesome for the Islamic Empire's economy.

But then a new group of Muslims, the Seljuk Turks, moved into the region and they sacked the holy cities and made it much more difficult for Christians to make their pilgrimages. And while they quickly realized their mistake, it was already too late. The Byzantines, who'd had their literal-asses kicked at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, felt the threat and called upon the West for help.

So the first official crusade began with a call to arms from Pope Urban II in 1095 CE. This was partly because Urban wanted to unite Europe and he'd figured out the lesson the rest of us learn from alien invasion movies: the best way to get people to unite is to give them a common enemy. So Urban called on all the bickering knights and nobility of Europe, and he saideth unto his people: "Let us go forth and help the Byzantines because then maybe they will acknowledge my awesomeness and get rid of their stupid Not Having Me as Pope thing, and while we are at it, let's liberate Jerusalem!" I'm paraphrasing, by the way.

Shifting the focus to Jerusalem is really important, because the Crusades were not primarily military operations; they were pilgrimages. Theologically, Christianity didn't have an idea of a holy war – like, war might be just, but fighting wasn't something that got you into heaven. But pilgrimage to a holy shrine could help you out on that front, and Urban had the key insight to pitch the Crusade as a pilgrimage with a touch of warring on the side. I do the same thing to my kid every night: I'm not feeding you dinner featuring animal crackers. I'm feeding you animal crackers featuring a dinner. Oh, it's time for the open letter?

An Open Letter to Animal Crackers.

But first let's see what's in the Secret Compartment today. Oh, it's animal crackers. Thanks, Stan...

Hi there, Animal Crackers, it's me, John Green. Thanks for being delicious, but let me throw out a crazy idea here: Maybe foods that are ALREADY DELICIOUS do not need the added benefit of being PLEASINGLY SHAPED. I mean, why can't I give my kid animal spinach or animal sweet potato or even animal cooked animal? I mean, we can put a man on Mars but we can't make spinach shaped like elephants? What Stan? We haven't put a man on Mars? Stupid world, always disappointing me.

Best wishes, John Green

One last myth to dispel: The Crusades also were NOT an early example of European colonization of the Middle East, even if they did create some European-ish kingdoms there for a while. That's a much later, post-and-anti-colonialist view that comes, at least partially, from a Marxist reading of history.

In the case of the Crusades, it was argued, the knights who went adventuring in the Levant were the second and third sons of wealthy nobles who, because of European inheritance rules, had little to look forward to by staying in Europe and lots to gain – in terms of plunder – by going to the East. Cool theory, bro, but it's not true. First, most of the people who responded to the call to Crusade weren't knights at all; they were poor people. And secondly, most of the nobles who did go crusading were lords of estates, not their wastrel kids.

But more importantly, that analysis ignores religious motivations. We've approached religions as historical phenomena — thinking about how, for instance, the capricious environment of Mesopotamia led to a capricious cadre of Mesopotamian gods. But just as the world shapes religion, religion also shapes the world.

And some modern historians might ignore religious motivations, but medieval crusaders sure as hell didn't. I mean, when people came up with that idiom, they clearly thought Hell was for sure. To the Crusaders, they were taking up arms to protect Christ and his kingdom. And what better way to show your devotion to God than putting a cross on your sleeve, spending 5 to 6 times your annual income to outfit yourself and all your horses, and heading for the Holy Land?

So when these people cried out "God Wills It!" to explain their reasons for going, we should do them the favor of believing them. And the results of the First Crusade seemed to indicate that God had willed it. Following the lead of roving preachers with names like Peter the Rabbit- Peter the Hermit? Stan, you're always making history less cool! Fine, following preachers like Peter the Hermit, thousands of peasants and nobles alike volunteered for the First Crusade.

It got off to kind of a rough start because pilgrims kept robbing those they encountered on the way. Plus, there was no real leader so they were constant rivalries between nobles about who could supply the most troops. Notable among the notables were Godfrey of Bouillon, Bohemond of Taranto, and Raymond of Toulouse.

But despite the rivalries, and the disorganization the crusaders were remarkably — some would say miraculously — successful. By the time they arrived in the Levant, they were fighting not against the Seljuk Turks but against Fatimid Egyptians, who had captured the Holy Land from the Seljuks, thereby making the Turks none too pleased with the Egyptians. At Antioch the Crusaders reversed a seemingly hopeless situation when a peasant found a spear that had pierced the side of Christ's side hidden under a church, thereby raising morale enough to win the day. And then they did the impossible: They took Jerusalem, securing it for Christendom and famously killing a lot of people in the al-Asqa mosque.

Now the Crusaders succeeded in part because the Turkish Muslims, who were Sunnis, did not step up to help the Egyptians, who were Shia. But that kind of complicated, intra-Islamic rivalry gets in the way of the awesome narrative: The Christians just saw it as a miracle.

So by 1100CE European nobles held both Antioch and Jerusalem as Latin Christian kingdoms. I say Latin to make the point that there were lots of Christians living in these cities before the Crusaders arrived, they just weren't Catholic- they were Orthodox, a fact that will become relevant shortly.

We're going to skip the second Crusade because it bores me and move on to the Third Crusade because it's the famous one. Broadly speaking, the Third Crusade was a European response to the emergence of a new Islamic power, neither Turkish nor Abbasid: the Egyptian (although he was really a Kurd) Sultan al-Malik al-Nasir Salah ed-Din Yusuf, better known to the west as Saladin.

Saladin, having consolidating his power in Egypt, sought to expand by taking Damascus and, eventually Jerusalem, which he did successfully, because he was an amazing general. And then the loss of Jerusalem caused Pope Gregory VIII to call for a third crusade. Three of the most important kings in Europe answered the call: Philip "cowardly schemer" the Second of France, Richard "Lionheart" the First of England, and Frederick "I am going to drown anticlimactically on the journey while trying to bathe in a river" Barbarossa of the not-holy, not-roman, and not-imperial Holy Roman Empire. Both Richard and Saladin were great generals who earned the respect of their troops.

And while from the European perspective the crusade was a failure because they didn't take Jerusalem, it did radically change crusading forever by making Egypt a target. Richard understood that the best chance to take Jerusalem involved first taking Egypt, but he couldn't convince any crusaders to join him because Egypt had a lot less religious value to Christians than Jerusalem.

So Richard was forced to call off the Crusade early, but if he had just hung around until Easter of 1192, he would've seen Saladin die. And then Richard probably could have fulfilled all his crusading dreams, but then, you know, we wouldn't have needed the 4th Crusade.

Although crusading continued throughout the 14th century, mostly with an emphasis on North Africa and not the Holy Land, the 4th Crusade is the last one we'll focus on, because it was the crazy one. Let's go to the thought bubble.

So a lot of people volunteered for the fourth crusade — more than 35,000 — and the generals didn't want to march them all the way across Anatolia, because they knew from experience that it was A. dangerous and B. hot, so they decided to go by boat, which necessitated the building of the largest naval fleet Europe had seen since the Roman Empire.

The Venetians built 500 ships, but then only 11,000 Crusaders actually made it down to Venice, because, like, oh I meant to go but I had a thing come up... etc. There wasn't enough money to pay for those boats, so the Venetians made the Crusaders a deal: Help us capture the rebellious city of Zara, and we'll ferry you to Anatolia.

This was a smidge problematic, Crusading-wise, because Zara was a Christian city, but the Crusaders agreed to help, resulting in the Pope excommunicating both them and the Venetians.

Then after the Crusaders failed to take Zara and were still broke, a would-be Byzantine emperor named Alexius III promised the Crusaders he would pay them if they helped him out, so the (excommunicated) Catholic Crusaders fought on behalf of the Orthodox Alexius, who soon became emperor in Constantinople. But it took Alexius a while to come up with the money he'd promised the Crusaders, so they were waiting around in Constantinople, and then Alexius was suddenly dethroned by the awesomely named Mourtzouphlos, leaving the crusaders stuck in Constantinople with no money.

Christian holy warriors couldn't very well sack the largest city in Christendom, could they? Well, it turns out they could and boy, did they. They took all the wealth they could find, killed and raped Christians as they went, stole the statues of horses that now adorn St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice, and retook exactly none of the Holy Land. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So you'd think this disaster would discredit the whole notion of Crusading, right? No. Instead, it legitimatized the idea that Crusading didn't have to be about pilgrimage: that any enemies of the Catholic Church were fair game.

Also, the fourth crusade pretty much doomed the Byzantine Empire, which never really recovered. Constantinople, a shadow of its former self, was conquered by the Turks in 1453. So ultimately the Crusades were a total failure at establishing Christian kingdoms in the Holy Land long term. And with the coming of the Ottomans, the region remained solidly Muslim, as it (mostly) is today.

And the Crusades didn't really open up lines of communication between the Christian and Muslim worlds, because those lines of communication were already open. Plus, most historians now agree that the Crusades didn't bring Europe out of the Middle Ages by offering it contact with the superior intellectual accomplishments of the Islamic world. In fact, they were a tremendous drain on Europe's resources.

For me, the Crusades matter because they remind us that the medieval world was fundamentally different from ours. The men and women who took up the cross believed in the sacrality of their work in a way that we often can't conceive of today. And when we focus so much on the heroic narrative or the anti-imperialist narrative, or all the political in-fighting, we can lose sight of what the Crusades must have meant to the Crusaders. How the journey from pilgrimage to holy war transformed their faith and their lives. And ultimately, that exercise in empathy is the coolest thing about studying history. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. Our graphics team is Thought Bubble, and the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. If you enjoyed today's video don't forget to like and favorite it. Also, you can also follow us on Twitter or at Facebook. There are links in the video info. Last week's Phrase of the Week was: Ali-Frazier. You can guess at this week's Phrase of the Week or suggest future ones in comments where you can also ask questions that our team of historians will endeavor to answer. Thanks for watching. I apologize to my prudish fans for leaving both buttons unbuttoned and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.

Whoah! Globe, globe, globe...