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# The Crusades

By 1095 CE, the Christian Byzantine Empire was struggling. The Islamic Empire controlled much of the Middle East and North Africa, and the Seljuk Turks, a growing Muslim dynasty, were eating away at what the Byzantines had left.

The Seljuks overtook most of Anatolia, then gained control of Jerusalem from another Muslim group. In doing so, they closed off access to Jerusalem, disrupting a popular pilgrimage route many Jews and Christians had once used to visit the holy city.

Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus saw this as an opportunity. His flailing empire needed military aid, and rising Western European powers could provide it.

So Alexius sent an envoy to Pope Urban II to ask for help. If you give us mercenaries, we can win back control of the holy land from Muslim control.

The Crusades...unpacked.

Alexius's motives were political: Resist the Seljuks and regain territory. Urban II had other ideas. Relations between Eastern Orthodox and Western Christians were improving but still split. Urban II thought reclaiming the holy land might raise his profile and strengthen the papacy, offering him more power within the church. A common goal would also distract from internal issues, so he agreed to help.

In November 1095, at the Council of Clermont in southern France, Urban II issued a call to arms to western Christians. He implored noblemen and knights to join the pilgrimage to recapture the holy land, asserting it was a command from Christ and that those who died during the effort would be forgiven of their sins.

Word spread and response was huge—not just from knights and noblemen but from everyone. Cries of “God wills it” echoed across western Europe. Motivations to join, or “take the cross,” varied. Many sought

favor in the eyes of God and wanted to follow His will; others desired social status. Merchants wanted a piece of Middle Eastern trade routes. Many peasants just wanted to escape debt or access consistent meals.

Excitement was rampant, and before Urban II could organize a formal army, a group of thousands of mostly poor Christians, led by a priest named Peter the Hermit, made their way east. The “People’s Crusade,” operating against the pope’s advice, was disastrous.

The group terrorized and massacred Jews in present-day Germany en route to the Anatolian peninsula. Once there, they were quickly wiped out by Turkish forces. But the fervor and violence of this initial, untrained group was written off amid the surprising success of the first official Crusade.

Starting in 1097, tens of thousands of troops descended upon the Middle East. The western knights captured Antioch in June 1098 and Jerusalem in July 1099, massacring thousands of Muslims each time. Crusader states were set up in Jerusalem, Antioch, Edessa, and Tripoli. These bloody victories came much quicker than Urban II and Alexius expected, and they took this outcome as a sign that their Crusading worked.

But...there was really only one successful Crusade: that first one. Between 1095 and 1270, there were at least eight Crusades. Motivations and targets shifted. The primary goal of regaining control of formerly Christian territory from Muslims was extended to include conquering pagan areas and converting the people who lived there. The gains of the First Crusade were lost in subsequent Crusades...and then some, leaving the Byzantine Empire even weaker than before. In 1291, the final Crusade state fell to the Mamluk Sultanate. In the end, Muslims held onto control of the region.

The Crusades were a costly enterprise, both financially and in loss of life. The papacy, though, was strengthened, with popes experiencing greater influence in the church and society throughout the 12th and 13th centuries. The notion of religious justification for military action proved influential, especially during the conquest of the New World in the 15th and 16th centuries. The existence of Crusader states also had contributed to an uptick in trade and travel between Europe and the Middle East.

But the most significant impact of the Crusades was on religious relations. Even today, dynamics stemming from the Crusades permeate the historical and political relationships between Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

