



The Crusades

Zoé Oldenbourg

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It was a great adventure, motivated by more than simply religion or pure aggression: the Crusades resulted from an emotional climate that led people from all walks of life to leave their homes and follow the unattainable ideal of a heavenly Jerusalem here on Earth. A prize-winning author paints a portrait of the whole of feudal society, evoking its exceptional vitality and the ingenuity of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem--one of the more sophisticated achievements of the Middle Ages--and personalities such as Tancred, Peter the Hermit, Richard the Lionhearted, and Saladin.

The Crusades Details

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Author : Zoé Oldenbourg

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From Reader Review The Crusades for online ebook

Toonvanelst says

While this book is called 'The Crusades', it only spans the period of the three first "numbered" crusades from 1095 to ca. 1200, or from the capture of Jerusalem by the Christians to the rise of Saladin and its loss. Oldenbourg's eye is set exclusively on the Holy Land itself, and more specifically on the kingdom of Jerusalem. She does not put the military story on the foremost place. While the mentioning of chevauchees and battles is unavoidable in a crusader history, the bulk of the text is devoted to the relations between Christians and Muslims, but also between the different kinds of indigenous Christians (Armenians, Syrians, etc...), the newly arrived Western crusaders, and the class of poulains (offspring of the Western Crusaders who adopted parts of the culture of the indigenous populace of the Holy Land). This angle, which differs from the more common practice of describing the crusades from a purely European viewpoint, was and still is refreshing. Oldenbourg's 'Les Croisades' is inevitably outdated and heavily based on narrative sources, but still worth of reading, if only to get some understanding of the early crusades from the viewpoint of the Oriental Christians.

Stephen Griffith says

I picked this up at a university's book sale on a whim and just left it in the bookshelf unread. Then as I was reading Gibbon, I came to the Crusades and didn't think it went into nearly enough detail so out this came. I thought this was extremely well written (and surely translated) and gave a balanced account of the motivations of all parties involved. I don't know how this is regarded in academia but I would highly recommend this to a general readership.

Andrew Edwards says

My favorite book about the crusades. Full of great stories and intrigue.

Dianna says

1/7/2010

So far so good. It is an interesting contrast to read about the Crusades and the Battle of Austerlitz at the same time.

5/18/2010

Well I have 40 pages left to read and I think this is a very non-biased look at a period of time which seems to be not much different than other periods with people fighting and killing each other because they don't believe the same and have differences. I wonder if it will ever end?

Ross says

Huge detailed tome covering the somewhat over a hundred years from the end of the 11th C to the beginning of the 13th C. The work is well written, but I only give it 3 stars because the subject is so dreadfully sad with murder and torture and display of what a monster humans can be.

Erik Graff says

Crusades were military missions pronounced by the Papacy. The reconciliation of the teachings of the pacific Jesus with the secular interests of Rome was, of course, a stretch, but the sin of it all was entirely mitigated by indulgences proffered participants by the Pope.

Zoe Oldenbourg has covered some of the Crusades in her fiction, both those directed externally, against Islam, and those directed internally, against supposed Christian heretics such as the Cathars. This non-fiction book is specifically about the Crusades ostensibly directed at gaining, holding and finally regaining Palestine. It is characteristic of the author's genius that she manages to elicit sympathetic understanding both for the rapacious Crusaders and for their victims, the thousands of Moslems, Jews and Orthodox Christians slaughtered.

GoldGato says

Oldenbourg was THE expert on the Crusades and the medieval ages, so this is a good book to get a firm foundation on the reason for the Holy Wars. Each separate Crusade is explained along with the opposing side. She does a very good job of showing the political divides among the Islamic leaders, most of whom did not view the battles as jihads, but as opportunities to gain territory from their fellow princes.

She does the same with the Franks, showing how their greed and lust for land damned them from the beginning. Baldwin the Leper King is illuminated here, and the story really picks up with him and Saladin. I don't rate it higher because sometimes she backtracks, and the reader is left wondering which battle she is now discussing. But if you need to understand the why-behind-the-why, this is a good start.

Book Season = Winter (you'll need the extra time)

David Dort says

If you think modern geopolitics, war and religious-imperialist urges are driven by the darkest and strangest of our desires and fears, look no further than the never-ending banal brutality of the 200 years of the Crusades. Oldenbourg adds by addition, which means if you are stunned by your boredom at the continued carnage about 100 years into the brain-twisting logistics and repeated attempts to take back, (lose) and keep (and lose), the various parts of holy land, means you get the point. An ever-shifting alliance(s) between

various Christian and Islamic factions and the helpless population at their mercies, makes the modern UN look like a kids birthday balloon party. And if you think that the Crusades were "over" 800 years ago, please look no further than Jerusalem, yesterday. You'll find yourself rooting for the most despicable people that ever rule Christendom, if for no other reason, that you just want it to finally end. And it did, when one Christian army sacked a fading Christian empire. Huh?

Peter says

A thorough and wide history of not just the first Three Crusades, but the whole time period from ~1059--end of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

One of the most fascinating aspects of any general history book is how the author chooses to arrange the topics. It is extremely difficult to have a perfectly chronological book. Some jumping around inevitably has to happen. That, obviously along with the scholarly analysis, is what makes all the difference between texts about the same time period.

It was a fairly even handed analysis, not terribly Euro-centric, given the scholarship of when the book was written.

I am very much looking forward to reading Oldenbourg's book on the Albigensian Crusade.

Phillip Kay says

I was so impressed by the clearness, scholarship and insight displayed in the first chapter that I went back immediately and read it again. There are whole subjects, scholars' lifetimes, in some of her clauses.

Concentrating on the period of the first three Crusades Oldenbourg manages to bring out, or suggest, many of the political, cultural, literary and economic factors giving rise to this movement or which occurred during, and as a result of, the Crusades.

The subject is an immense one: the results of the Germanic invasions; the position of the Papacy; the 'Holy War' and its legacy; the economic effects of overpopulation on a poorly developed agriculture; feudalism; the differences between eastern and western Christianity; heresies and national differences in the east; the history of Constantinople; the rise of the †Turks; the divisions and unity of Islam; relations between the Turks and the Arabs, Christians and Muslims; cultural effects of East on West and vice versa; literary influences in both directions; the legend of the Crusader; subsequent history of 'crusades' such as the Albigensian, the Inquisition and the Conquistadores.

Oldenbourg's book is a social, cultural, political and military history of the period, and covers the history of Turkey, Persia, Iran, Iraq, the Bosphorus, the Balkans, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Arabia, Egypt, Italy, Sicily, Spain and southern Europe. She makes illuminating references to other phenomenon such as colonialism, and is exceptional in that she is able to imaginatively suggest the attitudes, beliefs and limitations of the people she is writing about.

It was a time before machines were widely used. "Man was therefore infinitely closer to physical reality than

we can be now. Tools and raw materials had a value and immediacy not easy for us to understand. This direct contact with matter whose laws he knew only empirically made man simultaneously more superstitious than we are today and more skillful and enterprising.”

Life was short (average expectation between 30 and 35 years) and medicine primitive. “Men's helplessness against these scourges is hard for a present day European to understand. In fact, their only defense against epidemics was a terrified and superstitious trust in the divine mercy to be obtained by prayer and sacrifice...”

Oldenbourg is illuminating on the distinction between western and eastern religious feeling, in a way which explains much subsequent Catholic history. She says also that “men thought of themselves first and foremost as religious beings...”

A plethora of suggestive ideas: that popular religion was (and is) largely pagan; that miracles occupied the space in our lives of science. “Even in Latin speaking countries like France and Spain the ruling class was exclusively a warrior caste whose ideals were Germanic in inspiration.”

“In Europe the whole temper of feudal society made the warrior saint and archangel the objects of special devotion, to such an extent that it is not easy to see what distinguishes them from warrior deities.”

The rise of Turkish power threatened both the Western and Arab states, although it itself was Islamic. The Arabs, friendly to Christians, had been accepted politically in their position of power in Syria and the Middle East as well as elsewhere for 400 years. Now the Turks were conquering areas towards the Holy Land, and also areas in the Bosphorus - they posed a direct threat to Byzantium.

At the same time as the Turks were conquering in the east, the Normans, a Scandinavian people, were raiding and occupying territory in the west. After France and England, their objective became Sicily and southern Italy, and then, increasingly, the Balkans and Byzantium itself.

Although the Holy Land was threatened by the rising Turkish power, it had been Islamic for a long time previously.: the Crusades were initially launched to protect Byzantium from the Turks. But the Crusaders included Normans, who were more interested in conquering Byzantium than the Holy Land. And the Great Schism had recently separated the Churches of east and west: instead of reuniting them, the Crusades were to widen the gap between them and exploit their differences.

'Rome' (Byzantium) was inhabited by 'Greeks'. The Crusades began because initially the Emperor Alexius Comnenus had appealed to the Pope for aid in raising western mercenaries for his armies in the war against the Turks.. In return, a number a number of independent, suspicious and quasi-hostile western armies invaded the Emperor's territory seeking to 'free' the Hold Land.

“Alexius saw no reason to fight the Turks simply because they were infidels (he had suffered too much from Christians to share any prejudices of this kind)...”

“the Greeks were trying to use the Latins in order to reconquer their own lost provinces, while the Latins thought the Greeks had a duty to help them in the much more important task of recovering the Holy Places.”

“This exclusive, even excessive, exaltation of physical valour was something the Byzantines could never understand. The people of Western Europe believed implicitly that a man's worth was, first and foremost, measured by his prowess in battle. To the Greeks, courage was certainly an estimable virtue...” but they did not rate it any higher than many 'civilised' virtues.

As in many misunderstandings and differences, people compared different things as though they were the same. The Crusaders ignored their own practical behaviour, which saw them constantly fighting one another, sometimes treacherously, and despising the Church as 'cowardly', and measured their ideal behaviour as knights who had made a sacrifice of material goods to fight for the freedom of Jesus Christ against the overlordship of Islam, against the Byzantines practical behaviour, as heirs to a great empire which was manoeuvring for survival with newer powers who were equally as civilised, in which struggle diplomacy was vital, and alliance at times necessary, and ignored the ideal position of the Empire as the revered heir of the Church in the east and of the Roman Empire. People engage in such false comparisons to emerge the superior, and to justify following their own wishes without considering their opponent. Thus the Crusaders were able to despise and despoil their Greek allies.

“The fundamental difference lay in the co-existence in the Western mind of two quite separate ideas, the warrior and the Christian. Byzantium never seems to have been affected by any such ambivalence: it was too blatantly paradoxical for the logical Greek mind to accept.”

As in many great histories, the observations illuminate not just the events they are describing but the present and many intervening periods. The idea of the glory of war going back to the bloody, glorious and tragic struggle of the Northern gods is very suggestive. This tradition also supports the “all the world is sinful” approach to Christianity, always more enthusiastically taken up by the West than by the East.

Zoe Oldenbourg suggests a connection between the German tribes who destroyed the western Roman Empire in the 4th century and the Crusaders. The feudal nobility, she says were of Germanic or Nordic extraction, unlike the Latin peasantry. They preserved their ideals of love of battle and glorious death despite their conversion to Christianity. The union of these two diverse traditions led to the idea of a holy war, and such wars were waged in Syria in the 12th century. The Germanic tribes, many of whom admired Rome as a great civilising power, conquered it. Later, as admirers of Christianity, they attempted to conquer the Holy Land. In 1204 they conquered Constantinople.

Relics of these ideas can be seen in the Inquisition - the Church Militant - and in the deeds of the Conquistadores. Most recent was the attempt of Hitler to conquer the Jews.

The more one explores a subject the more there is to explore. Oldenbourg's book suggests this complexity.. There are no easy answers, few generalisations. It is both honest and learned, and motivated by a clear and compassionate intelligence.

Susan says

I have this on audio books. I have listened to it repeatedly. Great book.

K.M. Weiland says

Originally published in French (*Les Croisades*) in 1965, Russian émigré Oldenbourg has presented both casual history readers and earnest scholars with a sprawling epic that beautifully captures the spirit of the movement that so transformed religion and the Middle Ages. A brisk opening, in which she paints a broad picture of the lives and times of the Crusaders, is followed by an introduction to the political and religious

climates of the Latin West (Europe) and Byzantium. Then it's off to the Crusades.

Although never flippant in her treatment of the this historical epoch, Oldenbourg breezes through her subject matter with a light touch that makes the reading enjoyable as well as easily memorable. Her accounts of the why's, where's, and how's of the three first, and most noted, Crusades are lucid and taut, her reconstructed battle scenes both terrifying and entralling in their barbarism, and her political analyses of all three of the major players - Europe, Byzantium, and Islam - evenhanded to the point of bluntness.

The actual Crusades themselves, especially the Second and Third, aren't touched in quite the depth I would have liked to have seen. However, Oldenbourg has served perhaps a higher purpose in placing her main focus on the world the First Crusaders created for themselves in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Her insights into what made this fragile, hopelessly integrated society tick are thought-provoking and moving.

Oldenbourg closes with a slightly superfluous handful of chapters, reiterating and reaffirming the social mores of the Frankish states in Syria, but as a whole her massive treatise on the subject is both an extremely enjoyable read and an eye-opening look into a misunderstood time in history.

Kikou Hsieh says

I must say, this is a lovely and detailed book as well as insightful and descriptive. However detailed description in this case is a double edged sword. I found it enjoyable, but I believe it could be too monotonous, in my opinion, the content of the book could be wrapped up in 14 hours, but because of the descriptive narrative, it was dragged on for 24 hours. This volume is overall, very enjoyable and accurate as far as the social condition of the 11-13 century Europe and Middle East.

Cory says

The book does a decent job taking the reader through the various battles and intrigues of the aristocratic elite of the crusades (European & then the crusader states). It thus serves as a decent overview of the political and military history.

Overall, it's hard not to wish that the author took a more intellectual rather than romantic take to her subject material. The book is riven with unsubstantiated and/or racist claims. For instance,

- 1) Assuming you made it past all the diseases and violence, aging wasn't a huge deal. Proof: many old men were very vigorous according to historians and some old women were quite beautiful!
- 2) People were just smarter and more inventive "back in the day"--life hasn't gotten a lot better.
- 3) Modern-day poor societies are culturally, if not racially, inferior.
- 4) Many chronicles of the time can be taken at face value. She criticizes some for bias, but many accounts she readily accepts.

Overall, the book would have greatly benefited from more nuance and less romance. There is also a weird break ~2/3 of the way through where she finishes the political history and decides to go on a tour of Frankish society in the crusader states. These threads should have been integrated rather than awkwardly separated.

Rob says

At times very interesting, and at other times laborious. Oldenbourg does best when contextualizing the mindset of 11th-century Frankish knights and using this context to explain the (at times) perplexing behavior that they exhibited in the Holy Land.
