

# The first crusade long and short term factors history essay



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The crusades, so closely attached to religious beliefs and faith, despite the deep effects they left on both western- and eastern- orientated cultures involved, happened almost abruptly but gloriously, just like a miracle. From a chronological point of view, the whole story needed but a short period for its preface to happen: from the Gregorian Reform, a movement aimed to revive the full authority of the papacy in 1050s, through the decline of the eastern superpowers, culminated in 1071, to the epoch-making speech of Urban II at Council of Clermont and his appeal in 1095 which stimulated both clerics and laymen to put up the first “ war for God” against His – or their – “ enemies” from other nations, the time distance couldn’t be counted as a long one.

Therefore, seeking any long-term reason, namely a kind of background, for this historical event can be seem like a disappointing effort, because nothing significant of that kind is to be found at the first glance. However, it can be said that for each point in every historical process there is one, or more, perspectives to view that very point. In other terms, every historical event can be viewed, and analyzed, from different perspectives, most of which are nothing but a long chain of different causes, psychological, sociological, anthropological, spiritual or financial. Every collection of such causes can form a kind of background. That’s why in such events as the First Crusade, where short-time reasons emerge much more prominent, the same kind of reasons with their own vast and profound grounds can reflect long-term ones very clearly. The aim of the present article is to illustrate a fundamental picture of the world when the First Crusade was about to start, using the causes of this event as the essential and basic elements, to show the larger background of ages and ages conflict and rivalry between the East and the

West, Islam and Christianity, Judaism and Christianity, even the Latin  
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Christianity of Rome and the Orthodox Christianity of Byzantium. Meanwhile, the Crusade itself can mirror such backgrounds perfectly as well.

More than any other incident of medieval European history they [the Crusades] have entered the sphere of public history, where the past is captured in abiding cultural myths of inheritance, self-image and identity. Many groups and nations find their memory awkward, even distressing. The massacres of Palestinian Muslims and Jews at Jerusalem in 1099 or of Greeks at Constantinople in 1204; the butchery of Rhineland Jews in 1096 or 1146, or English Jews in 1190; the defeats of Latin Christians by great Islamic leaders, Saladin and Baibars... all these aspects of crusading history have left a residue of resentment, pain, anger, guilt and pride, depending on which legacy, if any, modern observers wish to claim for themselves. Therefore, for any historian the perspective taken is of importance. (Tyerman, 2006, p. xvi)

In the 11th century Muslim world had an established status, a multi-cultural but convergent society with convenient, though sometimes unstable, commercial and diplomatic relationships with its neighbor kingdom, Byzantium. The Islamic Empire had been growing much larger from its former region in Arabian Peninsula since the seventh century, and by the late eleventh century ruled many lands which had belonged to the former Persian Empire, including Iraq, Syria, Asia Minor and of course Palestine, with its all the most important city of Jerusalem. Having a large population of Christians, and a powerful Christian neighbor as well, all the houses of Caliphate, from the Sunni Abbasids in Baghdad to the Shi'ite Fatimids in Africa, were trying to provide safe and secure conditions both for their

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Christian inhabitants and for the increasing number of pilgrims who travelled to the Holy Land annually. Their power was only confined by the other great superpower in the Middle East, namely the East Roman, or Byzantine, Empire, which enjoyed a golden age of civilization under the Macedonian dynasty, especially its last great representative, Basil II (963-1025).

Conversely, the western Christian countries which constitute the Roman – Catholic kingdom of papacy, could claim anything but unity and solidarity. Feudalism predominated in the most parts of the society, sharing its political power with the religious system, which in its turn enjoyed its dominancy on the earthly power of kings and rulers, and preferred to fight for maintaining this dominancy rather than to revive the old conflicts with Muslims – although, as we will see, they did rely on this historical and fundamental hostility to proceed their own cause, e. g. encouraging their lay followers to ‘ take the cross’ and attend ‘ the peace of God’, in a later stage. Indeed, the clerics had no choice. The recent times were accompanied by several troubles for them, led to the instability and damage of their so far absolute authority. Since a very early stage, the popes had always exercised full power and might, speaking with the authority of God. In the 9th century, for example, the pope decided the most important matters, without having one single opponent.

‘ According to Nicholas I (r. 858-67), the pope is Christ’s vice regent on earth and speaks with the authority of God. Papal decisions have the force of law, and councils are only the means for carrying out papal decrees. No one may sit in judgment on the pope, not even the emperor’ (Lindberg, 2006, p. 60).

But just a couple of centuries past and the situation changed dramatically. Naturally whenever something like dictatorship emerges, there would come also a hunger for more which turns the views from the spiritual matters to the earthly ones. During the 10th century more and more clergymen entered the battlefield of gain and greed, making themselves more and more like the non-spiritual rulers. That's how they began to damage their conceptual and accepted holiness, showing their inner character as materialistic and power-thirsty as their worldly counterparts. Consequently, their social omnipotent status became more vulnerable. As if this had invoked the kings and emperors to interfere - indeed some of these rulers, e. g. Henry III of Germany or Edward of England, the Confessor, seemed to be much more pious than any priest- many of these found themselves righteous enough to raise a voice higher than God's representatives, even to depose a pope. Here is an example.

' The degeneracy of the papacy at this time [the tenth century] stirred Henry III to reform it. Between 955 and 1057 there were 25 popes, 12 by imperial appointment and the rest by the Roman aristocracy, five of whom were deposed by emperors - hardly an affirmation of the claim that the pope could be judged by no one.' (ibid., p. 65)

The aristocrats, on the other hand, could lose their faith and cut their supports to the church. In the feudal society of the late medieval, most of the churches belonged to the lords who had built them. These patrons owed their family's pride and glory, fame and decency to their churches, but they had to pay for all this as well. In England, for example,

'...possession of a church was a prerequisite for the acquisition of lordly status. Not only were churches a status symbol, they were also a source of income. In return for the initial capital outlay involved in building a church, the lord achieved enhanced status since everybody in the village had to use the building which he had provided for the benefit of their souls. The lord also received income accruing to the church and from it' (Harfield, 2005, p. 141)

Obviously, this mutual relationship was profitable for both sides, and thus very important to them all. The feudal patrons offered their full help and support to their church and expected to see a heavenly shelter to attract the congregation. Maybe the king was not powerful enough to persuade them to support his position against the clerics, but the clerics themselves could frustrate their supporters. If the church still wanted to remain the most authoritative source of power in the western world, a prompt and effective enterprise was absolutely necessary. Great revolts were right on the way.

And indeed, the mid-eleventh century witnessed so great upheavals, both in the East and in the West, in the Muslim lands as well as the Christian Empires, that it is difficult not to vote for short-term reasons, or causes, and stop looking for the above-mentioned larger picture, or the background.

First, there were two factors which caused the pervasive weakening of the Caliphs and other Muslim governments, so that the whole Islamic kingdom was fragmented and divided between many local and rival rulers, who in their own turn had to deal with a group of smaller but independent powers from Anatolia to Iberia. One of those factors was the conversion of a large

Turkish tribe, the Seljuks, to Sunni Islam, whose most prominent ruler,  
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Tughrul Beg, took the control of Baghdad from its Caliph by 1055 and became Sultan. His successor, Sultan Alp Arslan (1063-1072) defeated the Byzantine army at the battle of Manzikert in 1071 and extended the Seljuk Empire to include much of Anatolia. His son also managed to keep this power, but after his death in 1092 this power again was divided among separate princes. By this time, the Fatimid Caliphate, which had started to decline following the death of the Caliph Al-Hakim in 1021, had totally lost their influence on the African part of the Muslim world. This was the second and deadly stroke to the Muslim power in the East.

The Manzikert defeat in 1071 was not the only catastrophe the Byzantium experienced during that year. Another disastrous invasion came from the north, where the ever-growing Normans tried to cast their influential presence as vastly as possible. Tense relations with western Europe were another consequence of the lack of an efficient and proficient emperor in the East Empire. After the Normans attacked the Greece sometimes later, and appeared as a direct threat to Constantinople, both sides of the Latin Empire began to concern about their frontiers. The concerns were relieved when Alexius I (1081-1118) sit on the throne and restored the fortunes and the glory of Byzantium. His convenient attitude towards both the papacy and the lay rulers of the West, paved the way for many kinds of associations and collaborations between the two big Christian kingdoms, including military alliance and mobilizing all the forces to confront ' the enemies of God', namely Muslims, Jews and every other wayward nation.

' The incursions of the Turks and the growth of mature Jewish communities in western Europe became the focus of yet two other aspects of eleventh-  
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century Christian consciousness: a sharpened awareness of the differences between Christianity and Judaism on the one hand and Christianity and Islam on the other - a new recognition of the 'other' as 'enemy' - and the legitimacy of the Holy War' (Peters, 1971, p. 13).

Meanwhile, the popes managed to claim their long - lessened status back from the western emperors. The conflict between the two has been intensified during the first decades of the 11th century, when,

' Uniquely for a layman ... kings were also consecrated, " the Lord's Anointed" (Tyerman, 2006, p. 7).

Still, the heavier force belonged to the church, supported by the faith and wholehearted devotion lay in the heart of many believers. The pope Gregory VII (1073-85) founded a pervasive modulation in the whole system of the church during 1050s, called Gregorian Reform in a later date, equipped the clergy with the moral integrity and independence and challenged the esteem of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV (1056-1106). The next pope, Urban II (1088-99), hosted the ambassador of Alexius who came to ask for help in fighting with " the enemies of God". Urban II's answer to this was a journey to a series of the most prominent centres throughout the West Christian Empire to make some important speeches, including his famous speech at Council of Clermont in 1095, encouraging all the Christ's followers to make peace with each other and then " take their cross" and travel to the East to liberate their brothers and the Holy Land as well.

' Although, I sons of God, you have promised more firmly than ever to keep the peace among yourselves and to preserve the rights of the church, there <https://assignbuster.com/the-first-crusade-long-and-short-term-factors-history-essay/>



remains still and important work for you to do. Freshly quickened by the divine correction, you must apply the strength of your righteousness to another matter which concerns you as well as God. For your brethren who live in the east are in urgent need of your help, and you must hasten to give them the aid which has often been promised them. For, as the most of you have heard, the Turks and Arabs have attacked them.... They have occupied more and more of the lands of those Christians, and have overcome them in seven battles. They have killed and captured many, and have destroyed the churches and devastated the empire. If you permit them to continue thus for awhile with impurity, the faithful of God will be much more widely attacked by them. On this account I, or rather the Lord, beseech you as Christ's heralds to publish this everywhere and to persuade all people of whatever rank, foot-soldiers and knights, poor and rich, to carry aid promptly to those Christians and to destroy that vile race from the lands of our friends. I say this to those who are present, it meant also for those who are absent. Moreover, Christ commands it' (Quoted by Fulcher of Chartres in his *Gesta Francorum Jerusalem Expugnantium*).

Not all historians agree on Urban II's motivations in this critical point. Some of them, including German scholars like Erdmann and Mayer, observe that the goal of the pope's *Kriegsziel* was the reunion of the estranged Churches in the East and West following the so-called great schism in 1054. However, other scholars support H. E. J. Cowdrey who argues that a pope like Urban II, as a former monk of Cluny, should have felt a devotional love to Jerusalem, the heart of the Christian world. So he ' was in agreement with the crusaders, for whom Jerusalem was central from first to last in their view of

their task.' (Cowdrey, 1970, pp. 177-88). But whatever his intentions were, the pope could stir a large group of people, about 100, 000, mostly from France, Italy and Germany, to leave their homeland and travel a far distance to kill and be killed for liberating Jerusalem.

As it was pointed out at the beginning of this article, from a historical and chronological point of view, the First Crusade happened rather abruptly, with just a sparkle which started a burning flame. Thus it looks reasonable to consider it as a result of short-term causes. But these very causes in their own turn emerged from more comprehensive grounds, e. g. the inner and outer conflicts between the faiths and/or ideologies, the chaotic situation in the feudalized society of Europe, and the rivalry of the sacred and secular ruling systems for gaining more and more power.