

The Conceptualization of Crusade During WWI.

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ABSTRACT

An examination of the concept of 'crusade' as seen in the English-speaking World before and during the First World War. Defining Crusade as a concept along five standard lines the paper shows how 'crusade' was used in popular culture, politics and the historical record.

KEYWORDS

Crusades, WWI, World War One, The Great War, Christianity, War, Religious war

This paper seeks to examine the manner in which the term Crusade is conceived and conceptualized during the period before, during and after the First World War in the UK.

With such a large topic, the aim of this method is to provide broad and thorough coverage of the conceptualization of Crusade during the period. Political, cultural and historiographical (both of the Crusades and of the events of the period) evidence is cited. The marriage between the historiographical, cultural and political studies is not always smooth and there is constant interplay between them. These problems have been overcome in part by using a pre-conceived conceptual framework for Crusade in order to guide the narrative.

This framework consists of five aspects of the concept of Crusade: mass movement, ideology, righteousness, conflict and the 'other'. These aspects are broad and applicable to the case study. They were chosen with regard to the physical process of Crusade, such as travel and violence, as well as its motivations and justifications. The aspects of conflict and mass movement relate to the actuality of the Crusades: how many were involved; how far did their journey take them in pursuit of their aims; how was the Crusade fought? Ideology and righteousness are linked; together they provide a window into the motivation of the Crusaders. These two aspects often will be found to interact, the ideology providing the basis for the justification and sense of righteousness felt by the Crusader. The 'other' refers to both the way in which the enemy was conceived by the Crusaders but also the enemy itself. This aspect connects with both the motivations for and processes of the Crusades. It ties the other four

aspects together since the 'other' is often ideologically opposed to the Crusader, thus providing the righteousness for the mass movement and conflict.

The intended end result of this article is an analysis of how and why the concept of Crusade has developed in the period.

The novels that conceptualize Crusade in the years before WWI owe much to the work of Sir Walter Scott. In *The Talisman* and other work Scott highlighted the nobility of the Crusaders, their religious devotion and apart from a few key characters, the failings of the Saracen peoples who are referred to in terms of faith as 'misbelievers'.¹ The novels of the early twentieth century delivered similar messages. Crusades were shown as a mass movement, the novels focusing on the individual within the greater movement. Often the work was an adventure that utilized the narrative structure of the Crusades. The ideological 'other' of the Saracen was shown as weak. In *Cross and Dagger*, 1910, a Muslim remark that "'if all the Christians...were like their lord, or like this sainted disciple, our own prophet might lose one follower'", indicating a feeble faith.² The ideology of the Crusaders was not questioned by these fictions. It was variously described as a 'beautiful idea' or 'pure' and their core principles were expounded only so far as to justify their righteousness.³ That righteousness was linked to faith. In *Via Crucis*, 1899, 'great armies went to ruin and fell to pieces' because 'there was not the faith of other days' and the hero of *The Sign of Triumph*, 1904, is told that although he denies it, the cross-shaped scar has marked him out as 'God's Crusader'.⁴ The novels of this period have an idealized view of the Crusades. Specifically, they view the Crusaders themselves as righteous individuals within the greater movement.

That there was as connection between Crusade and religion in this period is revealed by *The Times*. The *Times Digital Archive* database reveals that of the 1,577 articles mentioning the term 'Crusade' between 1890 and 1913, 22.39% also have a connection to the terms 'Protestant' and 'Catholic'. Although this is evidence from just one paper, it is strong enough to show a society that connected religiosity to the concept of Crusade. The religious conceptualization of Crusade by the Protestant reformer John Kensit took inspiration from the revivalist movements of the nineteenth century in Great Britain. His Crusade was both an attempt to fight what he saw as the evil 'other' of Ritualism (in the sense of ritualistic practices he saw as no part of the Protestant faith) and to build the mass movement he believed was needed to save the Church of England from ritualistic and Roman influences. The modus operandi of the variously styled Kensit Crusaders or 'Wickliffe preachers' in their conflict was to seek out examples of ritualism within the Anglican church and bring them to the attention of the public, often by disrupting them or preaching outside the offending church. The

biography of the Church of England reverend and ritualist F. G. Lee highlights one ironic episode in which Kensit interrupted Lee and verbally abused him because of Lee's instruction to make more use of the 'Hail Mary'. When confronted by a female verger, Kensit was shocked and replied 'My good woman...why don't you behave yourself in Church?'⁵ While this confrontation was not violent, this shows Kensit's Crusade was certainly adversarial.⁶ In terms of righteousness Kensit believed vehemently in his task and that he was in the right. After his murder in 1902, Kensit was painted by J. C. Wilcox as a martyr, and a *Times* article suggested that he be remembered alongside John Knox and Bunyan.⁷ This indicates an individual who was popularly conceived as righteous.

The nature of the campaign as a consolidated mass movement is in doubt. The continuation of the movement after his early death in 1902 has led P. J. Waller to suggest that Kensit was a dispensable figure in terms of the movement's survival.⁸ It is a sound enough judgement; after his death his son took on the role of leading the Protestant Truth Society and publishing further invectives against the evils of ritualism and the Catholic Church.⁹ But while the nature of the Crusade is evident, the purpose is not. John Wolfe argues that this Crusade was an attempt to homogenize the Protestant cause in order to fend off 'nonconformist attack' and Grimley suggests it was an attempt to mitigate decline.¹⁰ Was the movement designed to combat decline, or the agent of decline? In truth it was always about the 'other'. Rather than attack the decline of the church or even the ideology of ritualism, the approach of the Crusade was to pursue individuals who adhered to that cause; the approach that left the ritualistic vicar of All Saints, East Clevedon, issuing knuckle dusters to his congregation when the Kensit Crusade was in town.¹¹ The Kensit Crusade was driven by ideology that sought out another that could be defined as having had the temerity to break the rules Kensit believed should be sacrosanct. Crusade was an evangelical construction, defined by its enemy.

Religious conviction and ideological positioning are also evident in the Crusading historiography of the period. Before WWI, historians treated the Crusades as a military conflict driven by Christianity. There is an element within the writing that seems to justify the actions of the Crusaders. Historian, Norman Barker's entry on Crusade in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* displays sentiments such as 'the Crusades remain a wonderful and perpetually astonishing act in the great drama of human life' or 'the ages were not dark in which Christianity could gather itself together in the common cause'.¹² He gave the Crusades a righteousness of action and condemned the Saracen or Muslim as merely a bit part player in the Crusaders' 'summits of daring and devotion'.¹³ The very structure of the Crusades as a mass movement, the conquests of the knights and their ideology, all garner praise from Barker. The entry in the encyclopedia

takes on board many of the chivalrous characteristics of the literary and Kensit conceptualizations of Crusade and it was only after WWI that these Victorian attitudes were shaken. Barker's extreme views, while echoed by historian W. B. Stevenson, were not enhanced or built upon. Stevenson, in a paper in 1912, is subtler in his portrayal of the Muslims; his use of the word 'yoke' to describe the Muslim hold over Jerusalem is intended to form part of a general introduction, but also positions the Muslim as an 'other', in the role of prisoner or captor in the pejorative sense.¹⁴ This usage could go further still, a 'yoke' being most associated with farming; the Muslim is positioned as a captor, but an unsophisticated one. The righteousness of the cause is hinted at through the language; his description of a 'great pontiff' and a movement inspired by 'devotion' indicates sympathy with the Church.¹⁵ However the nature of the conflict and ideology that is brushed aside in Barker's grandiose conclusions is dealt with more fully here. The economic aspects of the Crusade, the need to settle, to consolidate victories in the east and the 'opportunity which the Crusade offered to ambitious knights and princes' were highlighted and showed a conceptualization of the Crusade on two levels, the spiritual (reflecting the righteousness of the novelizations and Kensit) and the economic.¹⁶ The historiography of this period, influenced by religion and the age of empire, saw the Crusades as a righteous, Christian enterprise as well as a profitable one.

WWI was not the first conflict to be conceptualized as a Crusade; and certainly won't be the last. In terms of righteousness, the language of the clergy in the UK, Commonwealth and USA that preached war against Germany in 1914 was little different in tone from much of the material used to convince medieval French nobility to leave their lands for the Middle East. Bernard of Clairvaux asked Crusaders to 'drive off the enemies of the cross of Christ'.¹⁷ Bishop Bourchier in 1916 remarked that 'in the presence of God, His angels, and His saints,' the soldier 'shall receive the reward of faithful service'.¹⁸ The sense of righteousness stemmed from the Church and was encouraged by the governments of the day.

So much was this the case that, highlighting the pseudo-religious significance, a visit to Vimy ridge today has been compared to a 're-enactment of the war as Crusade' or a 'Mecca' for Canadians travelling abroad, a sentiment that has been felt just as keenly by Australians and New Zealanders when visiting Gallipoli.¹⁹ Contemporary righteousness was not gleaned from these focal points, however, but from the invasion of Belgium. *The Times* in 1916 described the heaviest debt owed by the allies to Belgium, 'that of having given to the allied cause the supreme moral sanction which has made of this war a crusade'.²⁰ This is an interesting remark that indicates the key to the righteousness of the allied action. Whatever

else Germany was seen as during this period, they were invaders, and as such were immediately conceptualized as a barbaric 'other'.

Outside the church, the memoirs from those who fought give a distinct impression of how the conflict was seen. The word 'Crusade' was eagerly used by figures such as David Lloyd George and some American generals as a title for works and memoirs about WWI.²¹ The journey made by the Americans contributed to the conceptualization of Crusade. In *The Times* the fact that 'Americans are from three to six thousand miles from the scene of the struggle' was evidence enough to seal their credentials as Crusaders, as they had engaged in a mass movement across the ocean.²² The troops from Australia and New Zealand were also conceptualized as Crusaders because of their long journey. In *The Times* they were described as 'Knights of a new crusade', who travelled '13,000 miles to fight for a crusade'.²³ The British campaign in the Middle East, in the Holy Land itself, encouraged the conceptualization of the campaign as a Crusade. Edward Thompson, in his memoir, *Crusaders' Coast*, remarks on the similarity of events: 'Overlooking Jerusalem is Nebi Samwil, Mizpeh, the Crusaders' Mont Joie, from which they first saw Jerusalem. From this peak our own men...saw the holy city'.²⁴ Even in the *Times* the conflict in the Middle East was referred to as 'A Crusade of Empire', the 'Fight for the Holy Land' or 'The New Crusade'; General Allenby especially was compared to a Crusader.²⁵ The conflict was conceptualized as a Crusade on the basis of righteousness of cause as espoused by the clergy, but more specifically because of the structure of the conflict, either the travel to reach the theatre of operations or the historical connection to the theatre.

In terms of ideology the nature of the conflict was defined in a variety of ways. As a churchman, Bishop P. B. Bull referred to the conflict as 'a real Crusade'.²⁶ The conflict was, if not holy, certainly blessed with the qualities of a Crusade. Irene Cooper Willis believed that the notion of holy war was needed to encourage participation because the liberal attitude in the U.K. would slow recruitment, and Albert Marin points to 'several factors: events, popular superstitions, religious beliefs, personalities' all playing a part in popularizing the notion.²⁷ There is almost willful ignorance of the tragedy of the conflict in the writing of historians like John Buchanan in 1917, who characterizes the Somme offensive with grandiose phrases: 'tremendous odds', 'wild adventures' and 'quiet cheerfulness' are three sentiments seemingly at odds with later thought, although it should be made clear that he was writing while hostilities still raged.²⁸ If the British clergy did not create the notion of the conflict as a holy war then, wrapped up in the hysteria of a nation ready for conflict, they certainly promoted it.

In terms of the ‘other’, WWI was based upon national lines and these were the boundaries for the conceptualization of the enemy. But there was an added bonus. The enemy, although already a mortal foe because of their nationality, was given an added element to provoke antipathy in the British public. For example the war was conceptualized by the Rev. A. F. Winnington-Ingram as a contest between the ‘mailed fist’ of Germany and the ‘nailed hand’ of the faithful, while he refers to ‘courage’ as the ‘special characteristic of the Christian soldier, as it was the special characteristic of Christ himself’.²⁹ Germans are not just German, but they are also cold-blooded and ruthless. A number of American preachers mirrored the attitude of the British clergy: William E. Barton demanded of his congregation, ‘Treitschke, Nietzsche, Burhinid, Clausewitz... [Is] the future to be dominated by these four books, or this other one, the Holy Bible, the Gospel of Jesus Christ?’³⁰ The reliance on philosophers to highlight cultural differences is evidence of a desire to portray the enemy as without respect for the Christian culture in Britain or the USA. In one case, F. Homes Dudden was happy to simply criticise those who did not immediately join the ‘Crusade’, referring to each of them as ‘profiteer, pacifist...shirker’.³¹ In the *Times* commentators were more than willing to attack German philosophies and their ‘world view’, which was a ‘code of morals fatal to the welfare and civilization of mankind’ or more simply ‘militarism’ or an ‘abomination’.³² The ‘other’ was not simply an enemy, but an ideological and religious foe who stood for ruthless militarism and atheism against Britain and Christianity.

The Times, during the war, did nothing to stem the flow of self-righteousness being applied to the conflict. The connection between articles mentioning Crusade and religious terms dropped when compared to the pre-war period. Of 262 articles conceptualizing Crusade published during the war only 5.35% also mentioned either Catholic or Protestant; conversely (and expectedly) 69.1% also mentioned ‘war’, an increase of 37.3% on the proportion in the previous four years. Crusade and the war were connected. Rather than contradict or comment, the newspaper reflected the prejudices of the clergy and other propagandists. Articles referring to the war as having ‘just cause’, as being ‘the war of honest against dishonest peoples’, to soldiers knowing ‘[they] fought for right’, and to the country knowing that it had the ‘supreme moral sanction’ were the tip of the jingoistic iceberg.³³ The Germans were equated with ‘militarism’ and ‘unrestrained autocracy’, ideologically alien to British culture and absolute aggressors, while much was made of the union of nations to defeat this common foe in the grand Crusading mass movement of WWI.³⁴ *The Times* trumpeted the American support towards the end of the war and espoused a degree of Crusading ideology around them as they ‘welcome[d] General Pershing and his staff because they [were] “standard bearers of the great

republic in the crusade”’.³⁵ Ideas abounded about the USA being the guardian of ‘democracy’ and that the ‘new world was going to save the old’.³⁶ *The Times*, it seems, while reporting on the war, also echoed the politicians and clergymen. They had decided WWI should be seen as a righteous conflict between a Christian nation that called upon its allies in a single mass movement and a barbaric military ‘other’. Faith and the military were essentially combined during WWI and they combined specifically against the ideological other to create a Crusade.

Post-WWI historiography did not declaim against the war or the nature of ideological conflict. Immediate scholarship after WWI recounted the details as far as they were known and was forthright in presenting the facts. W. B. Stevenson produced a far more empirical response to the issue of Crusade in the *Cambridge Medieval History* of 1926 when compared to his previous work. This highlighted a new approach.³⁷ Works by Munro are scholarly and dispassionate, a 1922 article that sought to corroborate the ‘connection of the Greek emperor to the inception of the Crusade’ being one example.³⁸ He is part of a move that attempted to reclaim the Crusades from the novelists of the nineteenth century with ‘rigorous scientific methods’, criticism of Voltaire and Gibbon’s superficiality and the notion that ‘the Crusades are much more than a romantic episode in the history of the middle ages’.³⁹ While there is a reaction to WWI and a change in the style of the historiography there is no overt criticism of the Crusades in the light of the slaughter that had ceased only eight years previously. J. B. Bury, heavily involved with the *Cambridge Medieval History*, was highly critical in his own work, suggesting that both the Crusades and the Great War used the ‘idea of human destinies then in the ascendant’ to lure ‘thousands to hardship and death’.⁴⁰ Discussion of righteousness and ideology in general dies away in these works immediately after the war and could be considered a reaction to the overtly justified violence that took place between 1914 and 1918.

The political developments of the twentieth century have had an effect upon the historians writing at the time. While thoughts of WWI may have dampened the nationalist attitudes shown by historian Norman Barker, the effects of the Nazi regime in central Europe caused a more severe backlash against religiously motivated conflict. The historian Carl Erdmann was affected heavily by the Nazi regime and by war. A product of the academic turmoil of the Third Reich, Erdmann managed to complete in 1935 a work of seminal importance which is referenced by many historians writing on Crusade.⁴¹ Erdmann was certainly tainted by war and loss. He dedicated the book to his dead, dispossessed, father and the ‘two brothers who gave their lives in 1914 and 1916’.⁴² The translator’s foreword makes sure to mention Erdmann’s distaste for the Nazi regime and it is hardly unfair on first reading

to suspect that his work on the Crusading ideal was a thinly veiled critique of the government that eventually cost him academic advancement and led to his untimely death during WWII.

Erdmann's work concerns itself with what the Crusade actually was. The call to pilgrimage takes paramount importance in most works, but he is keen to dismiss the idea of a pledge to free the holy sepulcher and argues that the formation of the 'Latin island of Jerusalem' helped to create 'crusading myths' from chroniclers who were aware of 'the light of its final outcome'.⁴³ In other words the reasons for the Crusades were decided upon after they happened. He counters this simplistic reading by dividing the question into the motivation of the Crusade and its objective. The first is characterized as a mixture of summons and pleas for assistance from Alexius at Constantinople; the second as the city and ideal of Jerusalem, a 'simplification of objective that was bound to take place spontaneously amidst the bands of Crusaders'.⁴⁴ Erdmann's use of Jerusalem as the 'enlistment tool' in Urban's grand plan for the 'liberation of Christianity' characterizes his take on the Crusades as a spiritual venture (gone wrong) and his Urban as a man of vision, building on the structured achievements and ideas of others, without stepping off the ready-drawn map created by Gregory VII and his reforms into creating something new.⁴⁵ Erdmann's Urban has one vision: to liberate the totality of the Eastern Church where Jerusalem and Constantinople are the same.⁴⁶ His Crusade is the vision of a single man (Pope Urban), hardly understood by the hundreds of thousands who went to the Holy Land. In essence it is a critique of the grand national plans in central Europe during the time of writing, and of the dictators, who had no clear understanding where their dreams of conquest would lead them. It is also an accusation; that these conflicts' ideologies were flawed and anything but righteous. It is not an allegory, but rather historical writing flavored by past conflicts and fear for the future.

Crusade, in terms of Kensit, was an ideological mass movement that involved direct action for a righteous cause. His concept of Crusade was based in part, no doubt, on the traditions of the period, the end of a century that regarded fighting for faith as good. The later political justification for WWI, the defense of a helpless Belgium against a godless Germany, brought Kensit's and the literary religious conception together with politics. The righteousness of the British and Commonwealth cause was translated into a war against an atheist 'other' by clergymen and soldiers alike. This mass movement, which people clamored to join in its early inception, was then brought down by the slaughter it caused. Fueled by a desire to recapture the Victorian spirit of conquest and encouraged by the romanticism of the Crusading model seen in histories of the period and literary works, the youth of the Empire answered the preachers' call. The horrors of the western front, captured in memoirs and revealed slowly

through the historical writing of the following decades, meant that when the truly atheist Nazi regime encouraged a world war in 1939 there was far more pragmatism. In the post-war period between 1918 and 1923 the *Times* stories that connected Crusade and the terms Protestant and Catholic had slipped to only 6.8%, while the references to Crusade and political terms (Socialist, Bolshevik, communist) increased from 4.5% during the War to 18.8% afterwards. Britain had lost its innocence in Flanders, and Crusade was no longer about faith and fighting. With pragmatic historians and writers, a new conceptualization was being formed. While the King thanked the troops in 1918 for their part in ‘this great crusade for justice and right’, Albert Marin rightly points out that ‘no angels were seen over Dunkirk’.⁴⁷ The failure to find godliness in later Crusades in the same way that it was found in WWI speaks to the mindset of the British soldier and the shock that WWI must have been. Military conflict had a massive effect on the conceptualization of Crusade. Despite the failure of some American influences to realize it, Crusade as a mass movement of ideologically motivated warriors determined on the righteousness of their cause died on the battlefields of France and a new, more considered and reasoned conceptualization of Crusade took hold.

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