

7.7 Religious Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

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Background: Christian Europe has a long history of religious oppression. There were eight Roman Catholic Crusades against religious opponents between 1096 and 1291 AD. While most accounts focus on conflict between the Catholic Church and Kingdoms and Muslims for control over Jerusalem and the “Holy Land,” other groups were subject of attack and extermination. European Jews were massacred in the German Rhineland during the first Crusade (1096). The Fourth Crusade (1202-1204) captured, looted, and virtually destroyed Greek Orthodox Constantinople. French Christians accused of heresy were slaughtered during the Albigensian Crusade (1209-29). After the Crusades ended, Jews were targeted during the Bubonic Plague and the Spanish Inquisition and Expulsion, dissenting Christians, including their leader, a priest named Jan Hus, were executed during the Hussite Wars in Bohemia (1419-1434). Europe was torn by decades of religious war between 1517 and 1648 and Oliver Cromwell and British Puritans continued genocidal assaults against Irish Catholics into the next decade. During the same period an estimated 50,000 people were burned at the stake in Europe because of witchcraft scares. 80% of the accused witches were older women suspected of consorting with the Devil or worshipping pagan spirits.

Questions

1. How were “Crusades” justified?
2. Why were Jews frequently targeted?
3. Why was religious oppression such a regular occurrence in different places and times in European history?
4. Should witchcraft trials be included as examples of religious violence? Explain.
5. In your opinion, were there common features in these incidents? Explain.
6. What questions do you have about religious violence in Medieval and Early Modern Europe?
7. What additional information would you like to have to better answer your questions and questions 1-5?

A. Crusade Against Muslims - Urban II: Speech at Clermont, France (1095): “From the confines of Jerusalem and from the city of Constantinople a grievous report has gone forth; namely, that a race from the kingdom of the Persians, an accursed race, a race wholly alienated from God, ‘a generation that set not their heart aright and whose spirit was not steadfast with God,’ violently invaded the lands of those Christians and has depopulated them by pillage and fire. They have led away a part of the captives into their own country, and a part have they have killed by cruel tortures. They have either destroyed the churches of God or appropriated them for the rites of their own religion. They destroy the altars, after having defiled them with their uncleanness . . . The kingdom of the Greeks is now dismembered by them and has been deprived of territory so vast in extent that it could be traversed in two months’ time.

B. Crusade Against the Jews of Rhineland – Report of Albert of Aix (1096): “There assembled in like fashion a large and innumerable host of Christians from diverse kingdoms and lands; namely, from the realms of France, England, Flanders, and Lorraine . . . I know not whether by a judgment of the Lord, or by some error of mind; they rose in a spirit of cruelty against the Jewish people scattered throughout these cities and slaughtered them without mercy, especially in the Kingdom of Lorraine, asserting it to be the beginning of their expedition and their duty against the enemies of the Christian faith. This slaughter of Jews was done first by citizens of Cologne. These suddenly fell upon a small band of Jews and severely wounded and killed many; they destroyed the houses and synagogues of the Jews and divided among themselves a very large, amount of money. When the Jews saw this cruelty, about two hundred in the silence of the night began flight by boat to Neuss. The pilgrims and crusaders discovered them, and after taking away all their possessions, inflicted on them similar slaughter, leaving not even one alive.”

C. Crusade against Greek Orthodox Constantinople – Report by Geoffrey de Villehardouin (4th Crusade, 1202-1204): “Then was it proclaimed throughout the host by the Marquis Boniface of Montferrat, who was lord of the host, and by the barons, and by the Doge of Venice, that all the booty should be collected and brought together, as had been covenanted under oath and pain of excommunication. Three churches were appointed for the receiving of the spoils, and guards were set to have them in charge, both Franks and Venetians, the most upright that could be found . . . That which was brought to the churches was collected together and divided, in equal parts, between the Franks and the Venetians, according to the sworn covenant. And you must know further that the pilgrims, after the division had been made, paid out of their share fifty thousand marks of silver to the Venetians, and then divided at

least one hundred thousand marks between themselves, among their own people . . . Well may you be assured that the spoil was very great, for if it had not been for what was stolen and for the part given to the Venetians, there would if have been at least four hundred thousand marks of silver and at least ten thousand horses -one with another. Thus were divided the spoils of Constantinople, as you have heard.”

D. Crusade Against the Cathars, Languedoc, France (1209-1229): The Cathars were a European religious group dating from the eleventh century. While Cathars identified as Christians, Roman Catholic theologians considered them heretics or not Christians at all. Cathars believed in two principles, a good God and an evil adversary (much like God and Satan of mainstream Christianity). Cathars rejected the idea of a priesthood and church buildings. By the early thirteenth century Catharism was probably the majority religion in Languedoc. Catholic texts refer to the danger of it replacing Catholicism. Pope Innocent III called for a formal Crusade against the Cathars in 1209 and appointed a series of military leaders to head a Holy Army. One of the leaders, Arnaud Amaury ordered the burning of a besieged town. When told that innocents would die, he reportedly replied: Kill them all. God will know his own.” It is believed that half-million Languedoc men, women and children in Languedoc were massacred during the Albigensian Crusade. The text that follows is by Raynaldus, who laid out the Church’s “accusations against the Albigensians”: “First it is to be known that the heretics held that there are two Creators; viz. one of invisible things, whom they called the benevolent God, and another of visible things, whom they named the malevolent God. The New Testament they attributed to the benevolent God; but the Old Testament to the malevolent God, and rejected it altogether . . . They said that almost all the Church of Rome was a den of thieves; and that it was the harlot of which we read in the Apocalypse. They so far annulled the sacraments of the Church, as publicly to teach that the water of holy Baptism was just the same as river water, and that the Host of the most holy body of Christ did not differ from common bread.”

E. Cremation of Jews in Strasbourg, Germany on St. Valentine’s Day (1349): “Jews throughout the world were reviled and accused in all lands of having caused it [the plague] through the poison which they are said to have put into the water and the wells . . . and for this reason the Jews were burnt all the way from the Mediterranean into Germany, but not in Avignon, for the pope protected them there. Nevertheless they tortured a number of Jews in Berne and Zofingen [Switzerland] who then admitted that they had put poison into many wells, and they also found the poison in the wells. Thereupon they burnt the Jews in many towns . . . On Saturday - that was St. Valentine’s Day - they burnt the Jews on a wooden platform in their cemetery. There were about two thousand people of them. Those who wanted to baptize themselves were spared. Many small children were taken out of the fire and baptized against the will of their fathers and mothers. And everything that was owed to the Jews was cancelled, and the Jews had to surrender all pledges and notes that they had taken for debts. The council, however, took the cash that the Jews possessed and divided it among the workingmen proportionately. The money was indeed the thing that killed the Jews. If they had been poor and if the feudal lords had not been in debt to them, they would not have been burnt. After this wealth was divided among the artisans some gave their share to the Cathedral or to the Church on the advice of their confessors.”

F. Hussite Crusade (Bohemian, 1419-1434): The Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire allied to exterminate the Hussite heresy. Jan Hus, a Roman Catholic priest who was the leading Hussite theologian. Hus denounced the Roman catholic Church because of the moral failings of its clergy and indulgences. Hussites placed their faith directly in God and not in the Roman Catholic Church, pre-dating Protestant theology during the 16th century Protestant Reformation. Hus was burned at the stake by the Church for heresy in 1415 but his followers continued to rebel. Before being executed, Hus refused to recant. His final words were “God is my witness that the things charged against me I never preached. In the same truth of the Gospel which I have written, taught, and preached, drawing upon the sayings and positions of the holy doctors, I am ready to die today.”

G. Expulsion of Spanish Jews by an Unknown Italian Jew (1492): After the King had captured the city of Granada from the Moors, and it had surrendered to him on the 7th of January of the year just mentioned, he ordered the expulsion of all the Jews in all parts of his kingdom - in the kingdoms of Castile, Catalonia, Aragon, Galicia, Majorca, Minorca, the Basque provinces, the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, and the kingdom of Valencia . . . The King gave them three months' time in which to leave. It was announced in public in every city on the first of May, which happened to be the 19th day of the *Omer*, and the term ended on the day before the 9th of Ab. About their

number there is no agreement, but, after many inquiries, I found that the most generally accepted estimate is 50,000 families.

H. An Eyewitness Account of the Witch Persecution at Trier (1581-1593): The largest witch trials in European history took place in the Diocese of Trier In Germany. As many as 1,000 people were executed during the witch scare. An eyewitness, writing after the hysteria had ended, described the events. “Inasmuch as it was popularly believed that the continued sterility of many years was caused by witches through the malice of the Devil, the whole country rose to exterminate the witches. This movement was promoted by many in office, who hoped for wealth from the persecution. And so, from court to court throughout the towns and villages of all the diocese, scurried special accusers, inquisitors, notaries, jurors, judges, constables, dragging to trial and torture human beings of both sexes and burning them in great numbers. Scarcely any of those who were accused escaped punishment . . . did the madness of the furious populace and of the courts go in this thirst for blood and booty that there was scarcely anybody who was not smirched some suspicion of this crime. Between 1587 and 1593, 368 people were burned alive for sorcery in twenty-two villages, and in 1588, two villages were left with only one female inhabitant in each.”