The Fourth Crusade: The Crazy One

by John Green (adapted)

After the Third Crusade (the famous one with Richard and Saladin), crusading continued all the way into the 14th century, mostly with an emphasis on North Africa and not the Holy Land, but the Fourth Crusade is the last one worth focusing on, because it was the crazy one.

So a lot of people volunteered for the Fourth Crusade — more than 35,000 — and the generals didn’t want to march them all the way across Anatolia (aka Asia Minor), because they knew from experience in the previous three Crusades that it was (A) dangerous and (B) hot, so they decided to go by boat, which required the building of the largest naval fleet Europe had seen since the Roman Empire.

The Venetians (inhabitants of the Italian port city of Venice) built 500 ships, but then only 11,000 Crusaders actually made it down to Venice, because, like, oh I meant to go but I had a thing come up... etc. There wasn’t enough money to pay for those boats, so the Venetians made the Crusaders a deal: Help us capture the rebellious city of Zara, and we’ll ferry you to Anatolia. This was a smidge problematic, Crusading-wise, because Zara was a Christian city, but the Crusaders agreed to help, resulting in the Pope excommunicating both them and the Venetians.

After the Crusaders failed to take back Zara for the Venetians, they were still broke, with no way of getting to the Holy Land to do their crusading, until a would-be Byzantine emperor named Alexius III promised the Crusaders he would pay them if they helped him become the new emperor, so the (excommunicated) Catholic Crusaders fought on behalf of the Greek Orthodox Alexius, who soon became emperor in Constantinople. This may seem like good news for the Crusaders, but it took Alexius a while to come up with the money he’d promised them, so they were waiting around in Constantinople for a while, and then Alexius was suddenly dethroned (removed from power) by the awesomely named Mourtzouphlus, leaving the crusaders stuck in Constantinople with no money. What to do?

Christian holy warriors couldn’t very well sack the largest city in Christendom (the Christian World), could they? Well, it turns out they could, and boy, did they! In their attack on
Constantinople, they took all the wealth they could find, killed and raped Christians as they went, stole the statues of horses that now adorn St. Mark’s Cathedral in Venice, and retook exactly none of the Holy Land. In fact, their attack was so successful that they were able to conquer Constantinople and the surrounding lands, creating the Latin Empire, which lasted from 1204 to 1261. During that brief period, the Hagia Sophia was converted from an Orthodox Cathedral into a Catholic Cathedral.

So you’d think this disaster would discredit the whole notion of Crusading, right? No. Instead, it legitimatized the idea that Crusading didn’t have to be about pilgrimage to the Holy Land: that any enemies of the Catholic Church were fair game. Also, the fourth crusade pretty much doomed the Byzantine Empire, which never really recovered even after winning back their lands from the crusaders. Constantinople, a shadow of its former self, was soon conquered by the Turks in 1453. So ultimately the Crusades were a total failure at establishing Christian kingdoms in the Holy Land long term. And with the coming of the Ottomans, the region remained solidly Muslim, as it (mostly) is today.

**Chain of Events**

**Directions:** In order to help you to strengthen your awareness of cause and effect relationships, create a flow chart of the events described in the above article. Describe the events in sequence, one in each box, but you MUST MUST MUST explain SUPER CLEARLY how one event led to the next. DO NOT simply list the events in order. Even if it seems obvious, YOU HAVE TO explain how one thing led to another.