Prelude to Holy War

Directions: Read the text and documents below and answer the questions that follow in full and complete sentences.

What are the Crusades?

For the simpler version, just ignore everything in the parentheses: The Crusades were a series of (very confusing and poorly organized) wars fought by Western European knights (and other people), at the request of the Pope (sometimes), with the primary goal of taking control of the “Holy Land” back from the Muslims and the secondary goal of defending the Byzantine Empire from the Seljuk Turks (but also, at times, attacking the Byzantine Empire for Venice, or expelling and killing European Jews or Spanish Muslims, or getting rid of violent knights, or converting Northern European pagans, or attacking heretics in Southern France, etc.) In order to understand the Crusades, it is necessary to begin by examining the historical context from which they emerged.

1. Since I’m obviously terrible at simplification, how would you explain what the Crusades were in simple terms?

The Situation in Western Europe: A Violent Yet Religious World

Knights, nobles trained in armed combat, became a source of violence throughout Medieval Europe after the end of the Viking invasions. Life as a knight had become an attractive career option for men of noble birth without lands of their own. However, with no invaders left to fight, knights began attacking each other, or attacking peasants, either for their own personal gain or on behalf of their lords, to whom they pledged their service.

“I think if you were to take a time machine back to the 11th-century, the first thing that would probably strike you is what a violent society it was. We are at a time when central government is not very well organized… [L]ordships… raid [and] fight one another. It’s a time of endemic (widespread) lawlessness.”

Source: Dr Jonathan Phillips, Royal Holloway, University of London

And yet the “High Middle Ages” were also a period of increased religious zeal, during which Western Europeans saw every part of life through the lens of faith. Contemporary issues like the East-West Schism (1054) and the Investiture Controversy (1076) only made people more passionate in their faith.

“The world of the Middle Ages was a world that was deeply concerned with matters of religion, and it’s almost impossible for us in a secular (non-religious) age today to overestimate how concerned they were. It’s almost impossible for us to understand how concerned they were.”

Source: Professor Paul Crawford, Alma College

In an effort to stop knightly violence, the Church tried to use the power of religion to scare the knights into good behavior.

“[Members of the Christian clergy] would gather all the relics (holy bones and clothing of dead saints)… and collect them in… a giant pile, and then they would summon (call) all the knights and they would show them the pile of relics and...
demand that they swear to obey the **Peace and Truce of God** (rules created by the church forbidding knights from killing defenseless people or fighting on holy days.) Otherwise, the saints associated with these relics would attack them and punish them… It often had a powerful psychological effect on knights. Sometimes they just collapsed senseless on the ground at the thought of all of these collective saints punishing them.”

**Source:** Dr. Philip Daileader, College of William and Mary

However, the impact of these efforts by the Church proved to be temporary. A large-scale solution was needed.

*"The bishops were essentially trying to redirect the energy of the nobility (the knights), many of whom had access to armament (weapons) but didn’t possess land, so they didn’t have anything really to do with that energy, and channel that energy in other directions."

**Source:** Bonnie Effros, SUNY Binghamton

2. **Why do you think the knights were so affected by the relics and the words of the priests?**

3. **Do you think this attempt by the Church was a permanent solution or a temporary fix? Why?**

4. **Based on what you have learned, how could the Crusades possibly help to solve this problem?**

**The Situation in the Middle East: The Holy Land Changing Hands**

The Holy Land refers to the region of Palestine (Southern Levant), which, according to the Bible, was given to the Israelites by God. The region is seen as holy by the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, largely because of the city of Jerusalem. For Jews, it was the city where King David and Solomon ruled, the capital of their ancient homeland, and the former location of the Jewish Temple. For Christians, it is holy for those same reasons, as well as for being the city where Jesus preached his message toward the end of his ministry. For Muslims, it is holy for all of the above reasons, as well as for being the point from which Muslims believe Muhammad ascended into heaven during the his Night Journey.

5. **Since the land of Palestine is holy to all three faiths, how do you think this could create conflict between them? How might such conflicts be avoided?**

The Holy Land had been under Muslim rule since 638 CE, before which it had been under Byzantine control. While Muslim rule was generally tolerant of Jews and Christians, it had changed hands several times, and by 969, it was under the control of the Fatimid Caliphate, who were a Shia Muslim Empire that controlled Egypt and the Levant. In 1009, a harsh Fatimid Caliph named Al-Hakim destroyed the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, one of the holiest sites in Christendom, built on the spot where Christians believe Jesus was resurrected. The Caliph’s son tried to repair the damage by working with Byzantines to rebuild the church, but such an offensive act created anger among Western Christians who heard tales of the destruction. In the mid-1000s, the Seljuk Turks entered the region. They
took control of the weakened Abbasid Caliphate in the Middle East and conquered the Holy Land from the Fatimids. The Seljuks at first prevented Christian pilgrims from visiting the Holy Land, but they reopened the city to pilgrims when they realized it would bring in money. However, once again, stories reached Western Europe and created even stronger hatred toward Muslims in general, regardless of which empire was in control. They also began taking over Byzantine lands in Asia Minor, winning Battle of Manzikert in 1071 and coming very close to Constantinople.

“I mean, if the Crusades had been brought on by the lightning-fast rise of the Islamic empire and a desire to keep in Christian hands the land of Jesus, then the Crusades would’ve started in the 8th century. But early Islamic dynasties, like the Umayyads and the Abbasids, were perfectly happy with Christians and Jews living among them, as long as they paid a tax. And plus the Christian pilgrimage business was awesome for the Islamic Empire’s economy. But then a new group of Muslims, the Seljuk Turks, moved into the region and they sacked the holy cities and made it much more difficult for Christians to make their pilgrimages. And while they quickly realized their mistake, it was already too late.”

Source: John Green, “The Crusades: Pilgrimage or Holy War?,” Crash Course World History

6. **What actions taken by Muslim rulers of the Holy Land fanned the flames of anger and hatred among Western Christians?**

7. **The Byzantines, who were much closer to the Holy Land, generally had less hatred and contempt for the Muslim empires on their borders than did the Catholics of far-off Western Europe. Why do you think that was?**

**A Cry for Help**

Byzantine Emperor Alexius I became greatly concerned by the speedy conquest of his lands by the Seljuk Turks, and he became so desperate that he decided to recruit mercenary soldiers from Western Europe to help defend his Empire.

“Alexius’ trained regular army that had been destroyed 25 years ago at Manzikert had never been replaced... Alexius, who had plenty of money, relied on foreign mercenaries... He asked the Pope to proclaim to the council that knights
would be serving God if they took service with the Greek (Byzantine) army in defense of the oppressed Christians of Asia Minor... Urban promised to ask for recruits... He was all the more willing because he feared that Constantinople was not so strong as its Emperor supposed. At any moment, the Turks might break in; and then they would be on the borders of the Latin west, his own responsibility.”

Source: Alfred Duggan, The Story of the Crusades: 1097-1291, 1964

Alexius asked Pope Urban II, his rival, to send a small elite force of knights to help him fight the Seljuk Turks in Asia Minor. What the Pope did in response was far more than Alexius could have imagined. In 1095, at the Council of Clermont in France, Pope Urban II called on nobles and bishops to fight a Crusade, or religious war, against the Muslim Turks, accusing them of persecuting Christians, and offering forgiveness of sins for anyone who fights. To the Pope, this was also an opportunity to increase his power and perhaps reunite the divided Church, under his leadership.

“[The Pope’s] troops would drive the infidel (disbelievers) out; ... [and] the Christians of the East would resolve their quarrels in grateful humility and acknowledge the supremacy of Rome.”

Source: Steven Runciman, A History of the Crusades, 1954

Thousands of Europeans from all classes “took up the cross” and set off for the East with cries of “God wills it!” However, not everyone was motivated by religious faith alone.

“The economic and social reasons for seeking an outlet from contemporary miseries – overpopulation, poverty, lack of cultivable land, subjection to oppressive lords, and the general drabness of life – were probably as potent (in gaining popular support for the Crusade) as religious idealism.”

Source: Nicolas Cheetham, Keepers of the Keys: A History of the Popes from St. Peter to John Paul II, 1983

“Not all of them, indeed, were there in behalf of the Lord... Some were there so as not to desert their friends. Others were present lest they be thought idle, while others, still, were there out of frivolity or in order to escape their creditors... All of them went for different reasons.”

Source: James A. Brundage, The Crusades: Motives and Achievements, 1964

8. Why did Emperor Alexius I turn to Pope Urban II for help? Do you think this was a good idea on the part of Alexius? Why or why not?

9. What were the religious reasons some people joined the Crusades?

10. What were the secular (non-religious) reasons some people joined the Crusades?