

Religious Wars & Violence

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson looks at religious wars and violence. The history of warfare and the history of religion seem often to go hand-in-hand. Because religion and religious ideology are so emotionally charged, religion often gets blamed for the violence and the wars that we've seen throughout history. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Crusades](#)

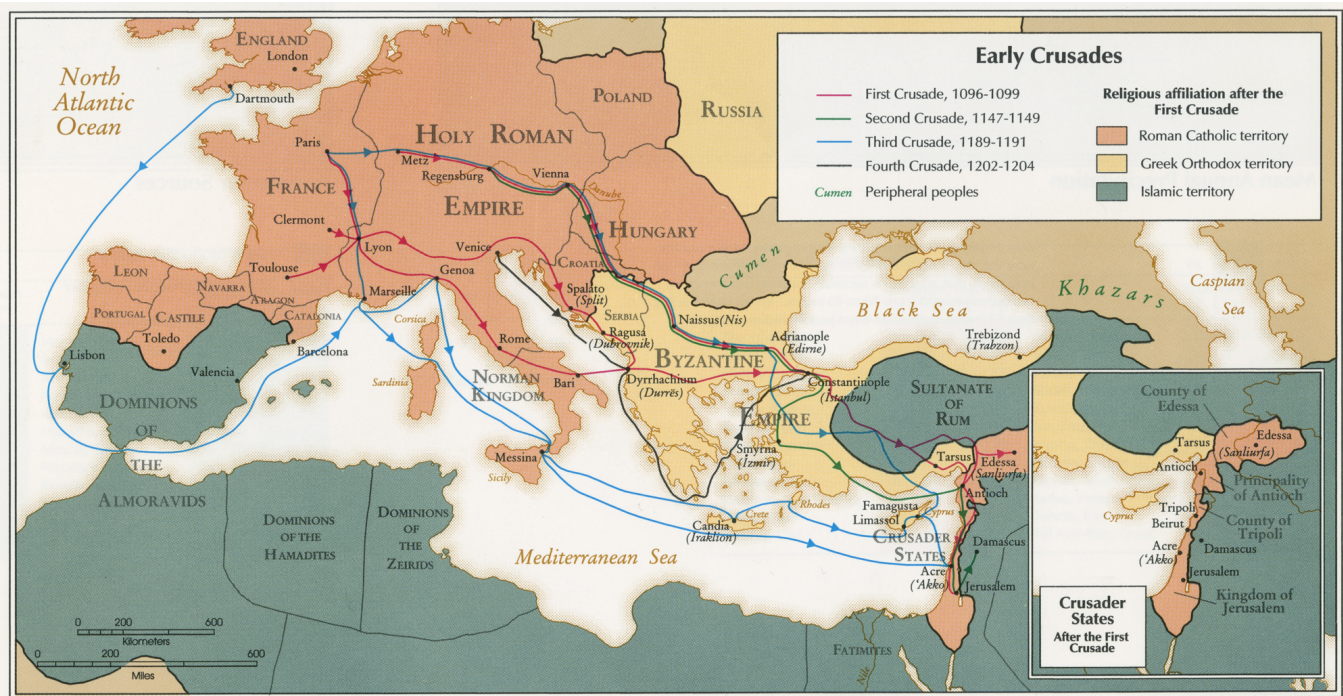
2. [Ethnic Cleansing](#)

1. Crusades

Some conflicts can legitimately be called religious violence and religious wars. However, sometimes it's possible that nations use religious ideology in conjunction with the desire of the state, with political and economic motivations, to make violent military advances in the name of religion. However, from within and from without, it's not always so easy to accurately assess motivations. In any case, historically, religion and warfare have a very close relationship at times.

The Crusades were a period in history that spanned from 1096 to 1192. It was a period marked by incredible violence and religious fervor. The word "crusade" comes from French. It meant taking up the cross in the hopes of a quick journey to heaven after death. The idea was that if you went on this heroic and valiant journey to recover Jerusalem for the Christian world, then you would go to heaven very quickly after dying.

The spiritual, if not emotional, appeal of this promise was the sort of propaganda that was used to recruit men to battle and to spearhead the project of gaining control of Jerusalem for Christianity. Both sides, Christians and Muslims, wanted more territory.



Map showing the paths of the Crusades

Many Christians had a genuine desire to conquer the Holy Land in and around Jerusalem. As the location of New Testament events, it was of central importance to the identity and mission of Christianity.



Crusaders Thirsting near Jerusalem by Francesco Hayez, 1850 CE

Muslims also desired expansion. This was also largely motivated by religion and the desire to spread the Islamic faith

It does seem possible to characterize the Crusades as having certain elements of genuine religious motivation, to some degree, isolated from political will.



TERM TO KNOW

The Crusades

A series of wars between Christian and Muslim armies for control of Palestine, Eastern Europe, and North Africa.

2. Ethnic Cleansing

It might be easier to identify the absence of genuine religious motivations in a more contemporary context. Take a look at the Bosnia-Herzegovina war of the 1990s. This war was officially recognized by the International War Crimes Tribunal, a special department set up under the United Nations as a response to the massacre of nearly 10,000 Bosnian Muslims. This was a form of **ethnic cleansing**. It's not a new idea in the history of politics, nations, and religions.

While land and religious ideology might be sloganized by the perpetrators as justification, it's almost unanimously regarded as the targeting of ethnic or religious groups for elimination from a particular area, either by death or forced relocation. Religion then is the target, not the impetus or a source of incentive.

Another term to understand in this context is **terrorism**. Terrorism often manifests as religious violence, but it's also possible that religion is a mask for other kinds of motivations. However, this term is very difficult to define and depends on perspective.



TERMS TO KNOW

Ethnic Cleansing

The targeting of ethnic or religious groups for elimination from a particular area, generally either by death or forced relocation.

Terrorism

The deliberate undertaking, or threatening, of violent actions against a civilian population designed to instill fear in that population in order to achieve desired social, political, or religious aims.



SUMMARY

Religious wars and violence often seem to go together in history. An extreme example of this is the **Crusades**. This shows that sometimes there seems to be a genuine religious motivation behind the violence and the warfare. This is contrasted with a more contemporary situation from the 1990s in

Bosnia-Herzegovina as an example of an absence of religious motivation. **Ethnic cleansing** was the motivation behind this violence.

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