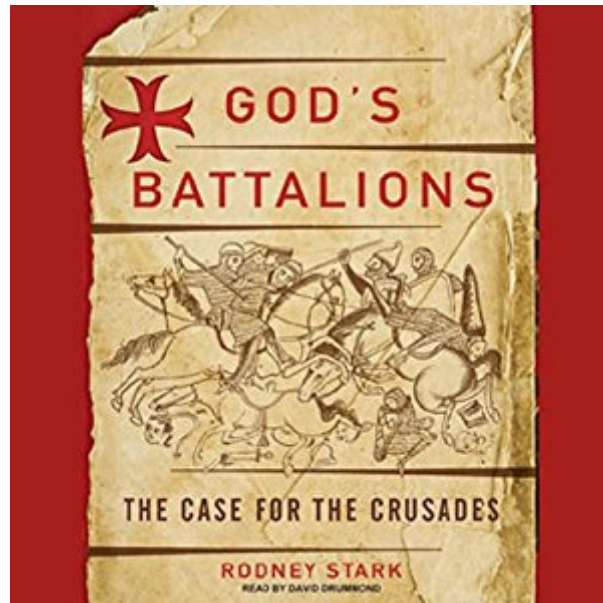


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God's Battalions: The Case For The Crusades



Synopsis

In *God's Battalions*, award-winning author Rodney Stark takes on the long-held view that the Crusades were the first round of European colonialism, conducted for land, loot, and converts by barbarian Christians who victimized the cultivated Muslims. To the contrary, Stark argues that the Crusades were the first military response to unwarranted Muslim terrorist aggression. Stark reviews the history of the seven major Crusades from 1095 to 1291, demonstrating that the Crusades were precipitated by Islamic provocations, centuries of bloody attempts to colonize the West, and sudden attacks on Christian pilgrims and holy places. Although the Crusades were initiated by a plea from the pope, Stark argues that this had nothing to do with any elaborate design of the Christian world to convert all Muslims to Christianity by force of arms. Given current tensions in the Middle East and terrorist attacks around the world, Stark's views are a thought-provoking contribution to our understanding and are sure to spark debate.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Very few people have much good to say about the Crusades nowadays. Most think it was a terrible blight on Christian history, and cannot be condoned or justified in any way. Certainly during the past few centuries, Christianity has been attacked, and people have sought to discredit the faith, partly on the basis of the Crusades. In such an atmosphere, this new book by Rodney Stark is as about as revolutionary as they come. He takes head on myth after myth surrounding the Crusades, and makes the case that the Crusades not only had a place, but were in fact in many ways justifiable.

He clearly demonstrates that modern histories about the Crusades are among the great hatchet jobs of recent times. Dispelling the many myths about the Crusades takes guts, and someone with the right intellectual and academic qualifications. Stark is certainly the man for the job: he has become one of our finest writers on the sociology and history of religion, and is unafraid to go against the tide. In this important volume he debunks the historical revisionism (which is often coupled with anti-Christian bigotry) about the Crusades to offer us a more sober and clear picture of what in fact took place. He notes that it was especially during the time of the Enlightenment and onwards that critics claimed that the Crusaders were mainly Western imperialists, those who set out after land and loot. Moreover, the contrast is often made between the bloodthirsty barbaric Christians, and the peace-loving Muslims. But as Stark persuasively documents, none of this is close to the truth. The real story is this: the Crusades were certainly provoked, and the Crusaders were mainly concerned to free the Holy Lands from Muslim oppression and to protect religious pilgrims who travelled there.

Dr Rodney Stark, who has written some of the most intelligent and readable books on religion in the last 20 years, has done it again. "God's Battalions" is an explosive retelling of the Crusades. And it will no doubt overturn the smug assumptions of many people. Stark points out that the Crusades were not Christian wars of aggression. Pope Urban called for a Crusade because the emperor of Byzantium had written to him, begging for help. The letter "detailed gruesome tortures of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land and vile desecrations of churches, altars, and baptismal fonts" (p 2). Moreover, Islamic armies stood within one hundred miles of Constantinople. Vast stretches of once Christian lands were now in Muslim hands. The entire of North Africa, once so solidly Christian it had produced a pope and boasted of 500 bishoprics, now lay under Islamic rule. Egypt was lost, save for some pockets of Coptic Christians. Much of the Middle East was lost. Now, Muslim armies seemed poised to attack a weak Byzantium, and after that, a fractious, divided Europe. The situation appeared dire. This is the background that so many of the modern critics of the Crusades ignore. But Stark doesn't merely overturn beliefs about the Crusades. He points out that "the many claims that the Arabs achieved far more sophisticated medicine than had previous cultures are as mistaken as those regarding 'Arabic' numerals" (p 60), which in fact were Hindu numerals. The medical knowledge came via Nestorian Christians. In fact, most of what was regarded as Arabic culture "originated with the conquered populations" (p 61). These conquered populations contained the libraries of thousands of monasteries, thousands of churches.

The popular understanding of crusades history is that ignorant, intolerant, and over-aggressive Western Christians suddenly invaded the cultured, tolerant, and peaceful Muslim Near-East bent on killing everyone who wasn't a Christian. In this book, Rodney Stark sets out to refute every one of those assumptions. He argues that the crusades were not unprovoked, the Christian West was not a backwards culture, the Muslims were not more intellectually advanced or more tolerant, and the crusaders were no more brutal in their warfare than the Muslims that they were fighting. On most of these counts Stark makes a convincing case. Stark begins his account where few crusades historians do: at the rise of Islam. I've read a great many books about the crusades (it's my field of study), and almost every single one begins either with the loss of Byzantine territory to Turkish Muslims in the second half 11th century or, even less helpfully, with the campaign of Pope Urban II just prior to the First Crusade. Stark notices this, and points out the very important fact that the Muslims attacked first, capturing the Holy Land, Egypt, North Africa, Sicily, and most of Spain from Christian control during the centuries prior to the First Crusade. The Crusaders were not simply trying to take territory from the Muslims, they were trying to take back territory the Muslims had taken from them by force during the great expansion of Islam in the early Middle Ages. It wasn't as if Christians suddenly decided to attack some innocent bystanders over in the Near East; the Near East had for centuries been Christian before bands of Islamic warriors took it by force from the Byzantine Empire. The West was further provoked by the recent (11th century) attacks on Christian pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem.

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