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ARMIES OF HEAVEN: The First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse by Jay Rubenstein

Basic Books, 385 pages.

Reviewed by James Reston, Jr.

The word, "crusade", has coursed through American political debate from the beginning, from Thomas Jefferson to William Lloyd Garrison, from John Brown to Wendell Wilkie and FDR, from Dwight Eisenhower to John McCain. And it seems that each time a political figure characterizes a new reform as a crusade, the word's meaning grows more tepid, more distorted, and more palatable, suggesting only an intense campaign rooted in moral righteousness. Perhaps this common usage is what sparked George W. Bush's terrible gaffe on September 16, 2001, only five days after 9/11, when he proclaimed that the struggle against jihadist terror was also a crusade. Perhaps Bush meant only to express American outrage and determination to hunt down the terrorists and their supporters. But he should have glanced at a history book or had a word with any Arab on the street before shooting from the hip with such a loaded formulation.

Bush's simple utterance that day had a devastating effect on the next ten years. The gaffe was Bush's greatest gift to Osama Bin Laden---for, to many in the Arab world, the C-word changed their perception of 9/11 from an instance of mass murder to a world-wide, historical struggle between Western Crusade and Eastern Jihad. In the Arab world, after all, the crusading spirit of the West was---and is--- a familiar, never-ending source of pain and self-loathing, a humiliation that had lasted for nine hundred years.

Only gradually in the past ten years have Western audiences and politicians come to appreciate how intensely these crusades are resented. At last we are paying attention to history, not merely the historical conflicts that are formally called crusades---five or six in the Middle Ages depending on the definition---but the exploitation that is hidden as well as overt.

It all began with the First Crusade (1095-1099), the first "holy war", and in the mind of many from the Eastern Mediterranean, the touchstone for the next nine centuries of killing and exploitation of the "Saracens" of the Middle East. Bin Laden had clearly intended from the start to cast himself as the avatar of Jihad, the defender of the faith against Western aggression.

The First Crusade was an apocalyptic juggernaut involving four armies from different places in Europe, waged in the name of Jesus Christ, by Christian soldiers motivated by the notion that the wholesale killing of infidels would save their souls. They brandished their bibles and invoked passages from Deuteronomy, the Gospel of St. Luke, and the Book of Revelation to justify mayhem, pogroms against Jews, slaughter of epic proportions---all spurred by the

fundamental notion that their deeds would hasten the apocalypse and the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Jay Rubenstein's Armies of Heaven is a beautifully researched, well-written and highly accessible account in which the events of the first holy war are recounted through the lens of apocalyptic theory. "On a fundamental level," Rubenstein writes in his introduction, "The First Crusade was a holy war, a style of combat that was, in the 1090s, altogether new: a war fought on behalf of God and in fulfillment of His plan. It did not just provide soldiers with a new path to salvation...It also enabled them to fight in battles longer and bloodier than any they had ever imagined....When the survivors returned to Europe and relived their memories, cooler and more educated heads could only agree: they had witnessed the Apocalypse."

The longings for 'apocalypse' began with the sermon of Pope Urban II to the Council of Clermont on November 27, 1095. While Urban II's actual words are lost, Rubenstein, a professor at the University of Tennessee, makes clear that the Pope's motivation was as much political as religious. In the late eleventh century Europe was tormented by endless internecine warfare among knights from petty provinces across the breadth of the continent. What better way to stop this pointless blood-letting than to harness the fighting spirit of the European aristocracy to one glorious, moral campaign to recapture the Holy Land---to wrest Palestine from four hundred years of Muslim control? Moreover, the Pope was locked in a struggle with a secular rival, Henry IV of Germany, who had proclaimed an apocalyptic fantasy of his own, threatening to conquer first Rome, then Constantinople, and finally Jerusalem.

As Urban II was addressing the bellicose proclivities of the aristocracy, a fiery monk named Peter the Hermit was stirring up the passions of the peasantry---condemning and exaggerating the supposed atrocities of Muslim heathens against the Christian holy sites of Jerusalem. Both knights and peasants, therefore, would be pilgrims of vengeance. They were hastening the Last Days when Christ would return gloriously to dispatch the heathens, and the world would unite under one banner and one faith. The soldiers saw the omens of the coming apocalypse everywhere, including, as Rubenstein notes, the tall tale that the teeth of horses were becoming enormous.

With exquisite detail, Armies of Heaven walks us step by step through the process of "taking the cross", the preliminary pogroms against Jews, the mobilization of the armies, and their ever more violent and uncontrolled adventure to Constantinople and beyond. With the Byzantine emperor of Constantinople, Alexius, the crusaders made an uncertain accommodation for safe passage, before the fighting against the Turks began in earnest at Nicea.

Rubenstein tells us that the term, Saracen, was a figment of Western imagination, lumping all non-Christians of the Middle East together into a collection of demonic degenerates akin to the minions of the Anti-Christ. That made the dispatch of a heathen into a noble act...the more violent the better, for God had willed it. After the capture of Nicea, "the Crusade was entering a new purely anti-Islamic phase," Rubenstein writes, "and the Franks would now have to confront an enemy they barely understood." During the eight-month long siege at

Antioch, the campaign deteriorated further into cannibalism, enthusiastic decapitations, and even roastings of the enemy dead.

But it was during the battle for Jerusalem itself in July 1099 that the First Crusade disintegrated completely into sheer butchery. Once the walls were breached, the blood of the Saracens was said to run ankle deep as the Christian soldiers rampaged over the Temple Mount and through the narrow cobblestone streets, only to fall on their knees in prayer and thanksgiving as weeping penitents when their blood lust was spent.

Rubenstein spares no detail in telling this awful story. Even in the midst of their slaughter the first crusaders perceived biblical and divine sanction: they were the angels of the Lord who were running the blood of heathens through “the wine press of God’s wrath” as the Book of Revelation had prophesized in Chapter 14:20. And if that were not enough the pious soldiers lifted their eyes from their carnage and saw in the distance the figure of a beautiful person sitting in witness atop a white horse: clearly Christ as the first rider of the apocalypse.

In the conclusion of his splendid book, Rubenstein touches only briefly on the modern relevance of this tale. “It is difficult to ignore the resonances between the eleventh century story I have told and our own time: a Western army attacking a little-understood Eastern Culture, earnestly believing itself to be a liberator of the cities it conquered, trusting that God was on its side.....only to discover that the sudden liberation of Jerusalem had led not to a new world but to an endless and endlessly dangerous occupation of enemy territory.”

Identification: *James Reston, Jr. treats the subject of crusade in four books, including Warriors of God, about the Third Crusade of Richard the Lionheart and Saladin. His forthcoming book is a novel about 9/11 entitled The Nineteenth Hijacker.*