

**Effects of the Religious Crusades  
On various aspects of Social Life in  
Medieval Europe**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to summarize the effects and impacts of the holy wars of the Crusades on the various aspects of social life in Europe during the Middle Ages and subsequently discuss how the holy wars paved the way to modernity. It focuses on the rise to power of the Roman Catholic Church in the beginning of the war and its consequential demise; the abolishment of feudalism from Western Europe and reestablishment of monarchy in a truer sense, returning supreme political power back into the hands of one king or monarch; a comparative discussion on the status of women in the era preexisting the Crusades, during the Crusades and their terrible condition after the end of the wars; various art forms and literature drawing parallels to the Crusades and incorporating the social structure into the works and finally, how the Crusades helped in the advent of modern thinkers, philosophers and contributed in the rise of secularism.

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### **Effects of the Religious Crusades on various aspects of Social Life in Medieval Europe**

The Crusades were undoubtedly one of the most impactful wars that took place in the Medieval Ages between the people of Christian and Islamic faiths. The four hundred years of wars that occurred in three phases had shaken the entire European continent and simultaneously the world during the time period during which it occurred. Even though the Holy Wars were responsible for countless damage and suffering throughout the centuries, it also paved the pathway for social progression. The Crusades have actively affected various aspects of the social life of Europe, such as, politics, arts and literature, role and condition of women and so on. Without the Holy Wars, the world today would have been much different from what it is now.

#### **Effect on the Catholic Church**

The Crusades, being a set of religious wars, impacted the Catholic Church the most. All the unrest and turmoil turned the general mass into God-fearing people and more of them began to actively engage in church activities. As more people began to donate to the church in hopes for a better afterlife, the amount of wealth of the church began to increase as well as the power of the Papal sector.

More often than not, the churches demanded high prices from the general mass for the service they provided and used the gullibility and piousness of the people to accumulate more and more financial additions. On top of that, thousands of crusaders, on returning from the battle grounds looked for asylum in the churches and monasteries as their psyche was severely battered by the horrors they encountered in the wars. Many of them donated whatever wealth they had to the churches and dedicated their remaining lives to service of God to get rid of their worldly sins.

Along all of these, the churches were constantly receiving all kinds of monetary help and other benefits from the local masses in extraordinary amounts during that time. Thus, the churches had immense power and control over the population during medieval ages. However, it should be mentioned here, that in the aftermath of the Crusades, the Muslim invasion was successful in destroying “the ancient organization of the Roman Church” (Partner, 1966, p. 68)

In the middle of the fifteenth century, the Crusaders faced a tremendous loss through the besiegement of the city of Constantinople, the capital city of the Roman Empire, at the hands of the Ottoman Army. This incident had a significant negative impact on the Pentarchy of the Orthodox Church, an ancient religious institution. This event led the four ancient cities of

Jerusalem, Alexandria, Constantinople and Antioch became devoid of adherents and devotees through the Islamization of the cities. As a result, the power of the Catholic churches shifted to European continent.

### **Effect on Politics and Social Structure**

Feudalism is an informal political system that was mostly practiced in the middle ages, most notably in the European continent. In feudal societies, as Marc Bloch defines, the king owned all the lands in his kingdom. However, the king would give some of the lands to the lords, who fought under him. These lords became the feudal lords and had power over the people who resided in the lands under him (1961). This is how the feudal societies worked. It is informal in the sense that, in written constitution, the king is said to own everything in his kingdom, despite the feudal aristocracy controlling the general masses in reality.

The Holy Wars were successful to break down the system of feudal aristocracy and thus, altered the whole political system. Monarchy was re-established and the power was centralized to the king. The king, now, had direct control over the general population. He, no longer, had to rule through his lords. Moreover, many of the nobles, such as the knights and the barons, had to sell their properties to in order to accumulate wealth to fund the expeditions for the Crusades. Furthermore, quite a lot of nobles who participated in the crusades could not return and due to lack of a proper heir, their properties were confiscated back to the Crown. As the feudal lords began to lose their power through both influence and number along with the adjacent increase of monarchical power, feudalism in medieval Europe saw its demise by the 1500s (Salmon, 1979).

### **Effect on Women in the Society**

#### **Women before the Crusades.**

In the early mediaeval ages, ranging from 476 to 1000 BC, women were mostly expected to be engaged in domestic activities, subordinate to their husbands and participate in rearing his children. But as the Christian monasticism got established, the church offered alternative roles for the women to participate in. In this period of history, it is argued that men and women shared significant gender equality. For example, the leader of the nuns, or the Abbesses, was able to rule monasteries which contained both men and women and could even own properties.

Women mostly participated in works that could be done in their homes or near their residing places. Women supported their husbands with their business ventures, as most such work had to be done near their abodes and according to some accounts, some of these women also owned their own business. Another popular sector women contributed in was spinning. As the people invented the technology of beer making, women also took the role of brewers (Schaus, 2006, p. 44). However, health condition for the women were generally poor as most of them died in childbirth and their life expectancy was at most twenty five (Classen, 2007, p. 128)

### **Women in the Crusades.**

Even though women were mostly active in domestic activities, there are records of them also participating in combat along their male counterparts or when the men fell in the war zones. In fact, women who belonged to the nobility were also encouraged to be trained in combat and riding, indicating that they were expected to engage in combat if needed (Santosuosso, 2004, p. 268). Women also acted as the regents of their estates in the absence of the lords and knights.

Antonio Santosuosso further mentions how the commoner women also contributed in the warfare through various substantial activities, such as, removing lice from the heads of the soldiers or washing the clothes that belonged to the soldiers. As a matter of fact, the only contribution allowed and approved by the Church for the ladies was to wash the clothes of the soldiers with the precondition that the women should be not be good-looking; since they feared that there might be a possibility for the soldiers to be engaged in sexual relationships with the women if the women were beautiful (2004, p. 268).

The women would join the men in their march towards the war zones, sometimes as to sell provisions to the armies or sometimes as their servants. Some of them would also act as prostitutes for them. Some of the nuns would also accompany the monks and priests in their journey to help provide religious services to the soldiers. Most of the time, the women were overlooked in victories but blamed for the defeat in the wars. This indicates that the society considered women to subordinate to men and can be treated as per the men's wishes. In addition to that, it also signifies how sexism and misogyny was active against the women, in contrast to the condition of the women in the pre-Crusades era.

Much information about the role of women in the Crusades are not found in the chronicles of the Western historians. Anna Comnena, a Byzantine princess, initiated to write

down the participation of the women in the Holy Wars. On the other hand, despite having the possibility of being overtly exaggerated, information about Christian women in the Crusades are mostly found in the accounts of the Muslim invaders.

### **Women after the Crusades.**

Women seemingly had to suffer the most in the era that followed the Crusades since most of them lacked proper skills to get a job or barely had any other financial support. Women began to encounter more restrictions on their works in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and the guilds began to become more patriarchal or male-dominated. Women also began to see a reduction in property ownership (Erler and Kowaleski, 2003). As a result, a rise in prostitution took place following the years of the Holy Wars. As the profession of a sex worker was not only illegal but also frowned upon socially, the sex workers barely had any legal rights or support in their work field. As a result, these sex workers became vulnerable to rapists, thieves, robbers and even murderers and could not take legal steps against their perpetrators.

Along with prostitution, other immoral acts such as adultery, polygamy and other forms of oppression of women began to increase, which became a huge problem for both the state and the church. Women were considered to be properties of the husbands and were expected to remain with the husband even if the husband was brutal towards her. Women had no divorce laws. Westerkamp states how women were burned at the stake if they committed adultery or murdered their husbands, even if the husband tortured her (2015, p. 5). This shows that the wives in that era barely had any agency against their husbands, which is the opposite scenario to the condition of women in the pre-Crusade era.

### **Effect on Art and Literature**

The Crusades enabled both the Islamic and the Byzantine art to get assimilated in each societies. Both the parties borrowed some form of art and literature from the opposition party. As a result, a new art form called the Crusader Art emerged during the Holy Wars. It is described as the art that was created in parts of the Middle East which were under the control of the Crusaders and incorporated Gothic and Romanesque styles. Even though the crusaders themselves were not much interested in artwork, the little contribution they had either got destroyed with their defeat or were lost. However, their architecture, especially the Byzantine castles can be the most

notable artistic contribution. The influence of the Crusader Arts can be found in illuminated manuscripts, sculptures, mosaics, panel paintings and frescos etc.

### **Contribution to Popular Culture.**

Even though the Crusaders merely focused on art and literature at the time of the Holy Wars, this eventful era had been referenced to in modern artworks since then. One of most important and significant piece of literature from the Middle Ages is the Canterbury Tales, written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, drew inspirations heavily from the whole Crusading Movement (Carlson, 2004). It is a collection of many stories that parodied real life nobilities and introduced many ethical and moral dilemmas. Chaucer's work helped popularize the vernacular form of English and influenced his contemporaries as well.

Other, more modern pieces of literature which were influenced by the conditions of Western Europe during the Medieval Ages are the ballads of Robin Hood and the novel, Ivanhoe by Sir Walter Scott. More contemporary forms of artwork which are influenced by the Crusades can be seen in various soap operas, video games, films etc. A very popular video game, called the Assassin's Creed, showcases the struggles between the assassins and the Templars in the Middle Ages.

### **Effect on Philosophy**

Sickened by the terrible socio-economic conditions in the aftermath of the Crusades, people began to challenge their existing ideologies and philosophy. As a result new ideas such as the Renaissance in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were formulated and each of them depicted a new philosophical approach to life. The Renaissance, which took place between 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, is considered to the transitional period from the Middle Ages to modernity. It is followed by the Age of Enlightenment, which made many modern and notable contributions in the fields of physics, biology, medicine and so on (Roberson, 2016, p. 246). Some historians consider that Principia Mathematica, written by Sir Isaac Newton may be the first influential work of the enlightenment age.

In the Dark Ages, livelihood of the general masses were formed with the main focus on the afterlife. But the Age of Reason valued reason and logic over blind faith. As a result, many of the misconceptions and superstitions of the previous ages began to fade through the skepticism



of the existing traditions (Foucault, 1977). This new practice of questioning the traditional beliefs gave rise to secularism, which is still practiced today in most of the developed countries and is slowly spreading all over the world.

### **Conclusion**

Like every war and transgression, the Crusades had its fair share of both positive and negative impacts on the society. On one hand, it changed the entire political system of the early Middle Ages and centralized power into the hands of the king back again, while on the other hand, it reduced the power women had in society and made their lives miserable. Furthermore, it destroyed the foundations of the Roman Catholic Church and diminished their atrocities by allowing new philosophies and world views, like secularism, to exist. The Crusades displayed what atrocities a man can commit under the influence of blind faith in unreasonable beliefs. Therefore, despite being an era of toil and pain, it is undeniable that Crusades had a major role in shaping up the modern world we have today.

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